

Yale accused of discriminating against students with mental illness in lawsuit

Yale students and alumni allege that the university pressures those who are suicidal or struggling with mental health problems to withdraw



By William Wan

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Students walk past Davenport College at Yale University earlier this year in New Haven, Conn. (Stan Godlewski for The Washington Post)

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Current and former Yale students sued the university Wednesday, accusing the school of systematically discriminating against students with mental health problems and pressuring them to withdraw.

The lawsuit, which is seeking class action status from the U.S. District Court of Connecticut, includes accounts by two current students, three former students as well as an alumni group representing several dozen others. In the court filing, students described being visited in the hospital after Yale officials learned of suicide attempts or other mental health problems and being warned that if they didn't leave the school voluntarily, the university could kick them out involuntarily.

In a written statement, Yale spokeswoman Karen Peart said, "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 wellbeing."

In the lawsuit, one international student – Hannah Neves, who was hospitalized in 2020 after a suicide attempt – recounted being visited by three Yale administrators and resisting their pressure to withdraw, according to the lawsuit.

Days later, upon discharge from the hospital, she learned the administrators had withdrawn her involuntarily. Yale authorities then told her she could only retrieve her possessions with a police escort.

When she asked about saying goodbye to her friends, university administrators told her “she could only do so off campus” because she was no longer allowed on Yale property.

The lawsuit comes two weeks after a [Washington Post story](#), which drew on the accounts of more than 25 current and former students and was cited in Wednesday’s court filings.

[‘What if Yale finds out?’](#)

Since the story’s publication, alumni, faculty and students have expressed alarm and concern to Yale administrators over the university’s mental health policies. In response, [Yale President Peter Salovey](#) defended the university’s mental health services and the way it treats suicidal students, while also promising more resources and possible changes in policy.

In a separate action, Sen. Edward J. Markey (D-Mass) asked federal authorities Wednesday to issue new guidance to colleges and universities to prevent discrimination against students with disabilities and mental health problems by using involuntary medical leaves of absence.

In [a letter](#) to the Department of Education and the Department of Justice, Markey cited The Post story and other accounts and asked for data and detailed responses on the issue by Dec. 20. Markey said urgent action is needed given the soaring number of college students reporting mental health crises. “No student should be denied access to education because of their disability,” he said.



Alicia Abramson has struggled with an eating disorder and depression and said Yale repeatedly refused to accommodate her mental disabilities. (Stan Godlewski for The Washington Post)

Alicia Abramson, a current Yale student, is a plaintiff in the lawsuit against the university.

“I don’t think anyone’s first choice was to go to court over this,” she said. “But students have been trying for years now to get Yale to change these policies, and all they’ve been willing to do are half measures and baby steps. I don’t want other students to go through what I did.”

Abramson, a 22-year-old junior at Yale, said she was repeatedly denied disability accommodations that she believes are required by federal law. As a sophomore, she said Yale mental health officials did not support her request for excused absences as she struggled with depression, an eating disorder and severe insomnia. She said the psychiatrist assigned to her by Yale’s mental health services was willing to prescribe her anti-depressant and anti-psychotic medication, but told her they had a policy of not writing notes to help students obtain academic accommodations because then “students could be untruthful about their symptoms.”

When she withdrew to deal with those mental health problems, she lost her student health insurance and access to therapy because of Yale’s policies and struggled to get mental help when she needed it most.

Since her return in 2021, she has struggled to get accommodations for her mental health conditions. At the time, sophomores were required to live on campus. Because of her eating disorder, she requested to live off-campus — with access to a kitchen instead of having her meals tied to an on-campus dining hall and its hours — but was denied and had to appeal the decision repeatedly to get an exemption.

She asked to be able to attend classes virtually, as many students did during the pandemic, to deal with her continuing mental illnesses and was denied, despite providing a detailed two-page explanation from her psychiatrist and an additional letter from a doctor specializing in sleep disorders.

Responding to the accounts of Abramson and others in the lawsuit, Yale's spokeswoman said: "Yale's faculty, staff, and leaders care deeply about our students....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 lawsuit was filed as a proposed class action with three plaintiffs serving as representatives for all students at Yale with mental health disabilities: Abramson, Neves, and a nonprofit group called [Elis for Rachael](#). The nonprofit was created last year after the suicide of freshman Rachael Shaw-Rosenbaum, who agonized in online posts about the possibility of having to withdraw from Yale.

In the wake of the 18-year-old's death, Yale administrators eliminated a requirement that withdrawn students to take two courses at another university to prove their academic rigor and got rid of a mandatory interview with its reinstatement committee chair. But students still have to reapply to return to Yale. The university says nearly all students who choose to reapply are eventually readmitted, but would not provide figures on mental health withdrawals or how many of those withdrawn students reapply.



Rachael Shaw-Rosenbaum during her last year in high school before leaving her home in Anchorage, Alaska for Yale. (Pamela Shaw)

The court filing on Wednesday included additional accounts from other students who were forced to withdraw and go through Yale's reinstatement process.

A former student, Rishi Mirchandani, described withdrawing in 2018 after a mental health crisis and having his first application to return rejected despite recommendations by his medical providers that he was ready and that it would benefit his mental health. He was eventually able to return and graduated in 2019.

Neves – the international student removed by Yale while she was still hospitalized – was forced to return to Brazil within 15 days because she was on a student visa, according to the lawsuit. Like other

withdrawn students, she had to forfeit much of the tuition she already paid for the semester and was not allowed to return for almost a year. She's now slated to graduate with an art and art history degree in the spring.

The lawsuit does not seek monetary damages, but asks for changes to what it asserts are discriminatory practices and policies by Yale. Critics and mental health advocates have argued that instead of being forced to withdrawal or remain full-time, Yale students should be given options such as reducing course loads or attending part-time.

The lawsuit was filed on behalf of the students by lawyers from three groups: Disability Rights Connecticut, Bazelon Center for Mental Health Law, and the public interest law firm Vladeck, Raskin & Clark.

"The law requires them to give reasonable accommodations and modifications to any policies necessary to give disabled students full and equal participation," said Maia Goodell, one of the lawyers representing the Yale students. "If a university has stairs instead of ramps, students in wheelchairs can't participate. The same rules apply when students have mental health disabilities."

Goodell and another lawyer representing the Yale students helped file a similar class action lawsuit in 2018 against Stanford University, which resulted in a [landmark settlement](#) a year later. Stanford agreed to give students a greater say in whether to take a leave of absence for mental health reasons. And if students choose to remain, the university agreed to provide disability accommodations.

The Stanford case could provide a roadmap for similar change at Yale. But Harrison Fowler, a student plaintiff in the Stanford case, cautioned that the settlement hasn't solved all mental health-related issues on campus. Fowler, who graduated this year, said their lawsuit highlighted the problem and forced Stanford to change some policies and commit more resources. "But I had a friend recently who checked into the hospital at Stanford and their experience of having no choice but a leave of absence was not that different. I know there are still problems."

Abramson, who is majoring in cognitive science and hopes to graduate from Yale next fall, said it's scary to file a lawsuit against a university she's still attending as a student.

"Especially an institution as powerful, rich, well-connected and well-respected as Yale," she said. "There's some fear of retaliation. But at this point, Yale has done so much to me already, anything more would be like a drop in the bucket. And if I've learned anything from all I've been through the past few years, it's that I can handle it."

If you or someone you know needs help, call the [National Suicide Prevention Lifeline](#) at 988. You can also reach a crisis counselor by messaging the [Crisis Text Line](#) at 741741.

Alice Crites contributed to this report.



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