“Jane was normally a stellar student but reported she cried daily for no reason, she didn’t want to complete her schoolwork or try to go to any of her club meetings,” said Erin Sullivan, Director of Student Counseling Services at Radford University. “She wanted to sleep all the time yet complained of no energy.”

In October 2011, Jane began attending therapy sessions for the depression symptoms she was experiencing. Her mother suffered from clinical depression, whom she lived with after her parents divorced.

“Jane said it would take every ounce of her being to make herself go to class, eat or even shower,” said Sullivan. “Jane would then feel so guilty for not living up to her family’s expectations.”

These are just a few of the signs that show a person could be dealing with depression.

There are many things that incoming freshmen can experience during their first year away from home, some good and some bad. One common conclusion is that freshmen normally partake in the party scene.

When this party lifestyle mixes with the stress of college, the results can be devastating. Unfortunately, the national trend is showing depression is on the rise on college campuses across the nation.

Radford University has seen the number of college students plagued from depression rise firsthand. Radford, like most universities, has a student-counseling center located on campus that is willing to assist students with depression and most other issues. The counseling center has several counselors and a psychiatrist on staff.

Over the years students have sought advice and help from the counseling center for a variety of issues. During the 2011-2012 school year, 746 students sought service from the counseling center.

There were even more appointments. The number one presenting problem was depression.

Erin Sullivan is the director of the student-counseling center on campus and has been there for seven years. Sullivan came to Radford University from the Carilion Hospital System back in 2005 after an extensive career of over 15 years as a licensed social worker. As part of the Carilion network, she worked at St. Alban’s Psychiatric Hospital. Sullivan graduated from Virginia Commonwealth University in 1990 with her Master’s of Social Work.

“It’s very rewarding helping people help themselves,” said Sullivan. “And that’s why I love my job.”

Sullivan says that most of the people coming into the office seeking help are freshmen, with a few graduate students and upper classmen. The main reason why freshmen are the majority in this category is because of the adjustment phase they encounter. This adjustment is sometimes triggered by the change in their support system, as they move from their familiar home atmosphere to a state of independence.

Being confronted with the full-time responsibility of time management can be massively overwhelming for a teenager beginning the transition into adulthood. College life is very different than a lot of incoming freshmen anticipate.

The inability to handle stress is another key cause of depression. Students must learn to make time for themselves in the midst of the busyness of college life. Without any down or free time, the likelihood of them encountering depression increases.

Another reason for the increase in students visiting the counseling center is because more and more students with mental illnesses are able to attend college. In the past, these same individuals were not medically approved to move away from home and their support system but now they are allotted this option.

“Ten years ago they may have stayed at home or gone to a community college but they wouldn’t have had that opportunity,” said Sullivan. “But with the advancements with medications and treatment, they have had that opportunity to move on.”

Some students choose to stop taking their meds when they are away from home because they want to feel normal. This decision is usually made because they believe that everyone around them is normal without medication. This decision to stop taking meds is a very dangerous and potentially threatening to themselves and the students around them.

This desire to blend and fit in with their peers seems to be clouding the judgment of students around the nation.

“They don’t have mom or dad there reminding them they have to take them (meds)”, said Sullivan.” So that sometimes presents problems for these students.”

Sullivan does say that not all cases of depression are students adapting to college or students who were previously diagnosed. Many of these students are seeking help after a relationship break up. When someone is emotionally involved and attached to another person, they may see their life as perfect. Then a moment later, if that same person has ended their relationship, they may feel as though the sky is falling. It is very normal for students to feel a wide range of emotions following a major loss.

Some causes of depression can be triggered by students lacking the coping skills necessary in order to thrive in the college life. If a student does not understand how to respond or react to the daily changes of life away from home, they become more likely to develop depression symptoms.

“Sometimes I think young adults have not learned effective communication skills,” said Sullivan. “Because of the modern technology and Facebook, I think it makes it more difficult for them to problem solve in person and work through issues.”

Something else that can contribute to this is unrealistic expectations. When a student comes to college, they can easily set expectations of what they want to experience or learn. If these specific goals are not met or are unreachable, it can often result in a feeling of failure or disappointment.

Seasonal affective disorder is often a cause of depression that typically starts during the month of October. The Mayo Clinic defines this as “a type of depression that starts during the same time every year.” Many people have never heard of this type of depression but it as common as any other.

The seasonal affective disorder usually begins in the early fall and lasts through the winter, according to the Mayo Clinic. Most people who suffer from this particular type never experience it during the spring or summer.

“For some folks who are predisposed to depressive symptoms, the lack of light in the fall can actually trigger depression,” said Sullivan.

Sullivan also says that if people already experiencing symptoms due to life stressors and they do not take care of themselves, they could be more at risk to develop depression. The Mayo Clinic encourages people not to attempt to just push through or forget about the change of season feelings they may encounter because it could be the initial onset of seasonal affective disorder.

The best remedy for this type of depression is more exposure to the light, or phototherapy. This includes doing homework in the sun or turning on more lights in bedrooms and living rooms.

Biochemical depression is another type of depression that affects students on a daily basis.

“That can actually run in families,” said Sullivan. “Somebody may be a little more predisposed if they have a sibling, a parent or grandparent that has problems with depression, and they may be a little more likely to develop it.”

Biochemical depression is one type in which people need to seek medical attention to help them deal their emotions. Due to her mother’s clinical depression, Jane is more at risk to be diagnosed with depression than other students.

Clinical depression is the term used to describe depression that is much more severe than just feeling down. According to the Mayo Clinic, most people diagnosed with this type are experiencing suicidal thoughts, weight loss, fatigue or loss of interest in life. These are very severe symptoms and should be addressed immediately by seeking medical help.

The other type of depression is known as the blues. This is normally a feeling of being down and not very motivated. Usually the blues pass fairly quickly and no medical attention is needed. Sullivan describes the blues as being short-term.

“Everybody goes through periods of time where they have a loss, they have a frustration, they’re upset with a friend,” said Sullivan. “It’s not long lasting.”

This is very different from clinical depression. The danger zone of depression is most notably seen when people begin having suicidal or negative thoughts. “A lot of times when someone is clinically depressed, they automatically have those negative thoughts.”

“We treat clinical depression daily,” said Sullivan.

Many people do not know that clinical depression is as common as it. The number of cases increases each year.

Although clinical depression is difficult to endure, it is absolutely treatable. The most common treatment plan is cognitive behavioral therapy and anti-depressants. Some students elect to do one or the other and some choose both.

“Cognitive therapy is where you look at your thought process and if you’re thinking realistically or if you’re thinking emotionally,” said Sullivan. “Your thought process affects the way you feel.”

Medication is not the only way to treat depression. Some students choose to not take any medicine for their depression because they want to feel normal. Others, such as Jane, have positive results from the medicine and are able to return to their daily lives.

“Jane hesitantly agreed to start medication, which was an antidepressant,” said Sullivan. “Jane struggled through the remainder of the semester but was able to sleep regularly, eat normally and concentrate better.”

Sullivan, and counselors on campuses everywhere, are encouraging students to take action to evade depression before it begins. She mentions activities such as communicating more efficiently, eating healthy, exercising and sleeping well as key ingredients to avoid depression.

The counseling center does not recommend natural herbs to students because of the possibility that they could react with medicines a student may be taking. An example is that some natural herbs counteract the affects of birth control. Students should seek medical advice before electing to take an herbal approach.

With the national trends indicating a consistent increase in depression among students, the counseling center hopes that their treatment methods and support will cause the number of depressed students to decrease.

The Student-Counseling Center is located in the basement of Tyler Hall and they are available for scheduled appointments. Students are welcome to walk-in and schedule a meeting with a counselor or take a brochure.