

College is a Stressful Time

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Parents send their kids off to college with words of encouragement like, “college is the best time your life”. Everyone seems to expect a smooth transition into college where the young adult fits seamlessly into the fabric of their chosen university with very little stress or strain. The expectation is that going off to college means that the young person is entering a new phase of life that provides a great opportunity for exploration, growth, and development. It is a cluster of great opportunities.

College is also a time of great stress. For many college students, this first time of being away from home for extended period of time is scary. Their support system is somewhere else, and even though parents are just a phone call away, the young person is on their own. This young person has typically been provided with consistency, structure, prepared meals, verbalized expectations, and built-in external accountability. Now, for the first time in their lives, they have relatively little externally provided structure and accountability.

Developmentally, young people in college are somewhere between late adolescence and early adulthood, a developmental no-man’s land. They are expected to be more emotionally mature than high school students, yet they are not quite adults either. After age 18 they can enter into legal agreements, vote, and get a credit card. They are legally able to drink at 21. Any or all of these privileges that come with turning 18 may or may not be developmentally appropriate. Judgment skills may be lagging. They may not be developmentally capable of thinking through options and possible future consequences, necessary for good choices. Examples might include common mistakes made by immature college students: 1) obtaining a credit card and maxing it out with no way of paying it off or even making the payments, 2) entering into a long term lease agreements with “friends” before knowing if they can compatibly live together.

Even though they may not be 21, they can still obtain alcohol and drink it without worrying about getting caught by mom and dad. Other drugs are also available. There are also plenty of opportunities to have sex--casual or otherwise.

Self discipline and the ability to develop and maintain structure for their own academic endeavors are common problems for college students. There seems to be very little preparation or guidance for what to expect about college, how to develop structure and accountability for one’s self, and internal self-discipline. Making the transition from home and high school to independent living and college is stressful.

Common sources of stress include:

- **Changes in routines**
- ~sleeping

- ~eating
- ~exercise
- ~amount of “free time” or unstructured time
- **Changes in academic structures**
 - ~Course expectations and projects that are assigned and discussed at the beginning of the semester may not be due until the end of that semester, leaving much room for procrastination and becoming overwhelmed at the end of the semester.
 - ~When students skip classes, parents are not called. Students decide if they are going to go to classes.
 - ~Students who are not turning in assignments won’t usually receive an individualized plan for getting back on track. They will flunk the class.
 - ~Many, if not most, students are ill-prepared for knowing how much time and energy is necessary to complete tasks and assignments and to plan accordingly.
 - ~Level of academic demands may mean going from never opening a book in high school and still making A’s to having to learn to study in college.
 - ~Possible test anxiety.
- **Making and/or managing money**
 - ~ College students often must pay for their own education
 - ~When college is paid for by parents, they still need spending money. There is often conflict with parents over how much spending money is really needed or they may work for spending money.
 - ~Grants, loans, and scholarships take time and effort to stay on top of the footwork to make sure that deadlines are met, that there are no “holds” or paperwork problems, etc.
 - ~Credit card offers or having parents’ credit cards for expenses.
- **Changes in Identity**
 - ~Challenges to self-image, with moving from being very visible in a small environment to being minimally visible in a large environment (e.g., big fish/small pond to small fish/big pond).
 - ~Moving from being the brightest kid in high school to one of a multitude of bright kids in college.
 - ~A college student’s identity is continuing to evolve from dependent child of the family to independent adult.

- **Social Changes**

- ~Having to actually make an effort to make new friends.
- ~Having few friends around from high school.
- ~Roommate conflicts
- ~New opportunities for dating and romantic relationships
- ~Easy access to alcohol and other drugs.
- ~New opportunities to meet and get to know people from other socioeconomic groups, other cultures, and people with different values from family and home town.

- **Family Expectations**

- ~Students may worry about the future, what kind of work they will do, where they will do it, whether parents/family will be alright with them moving away and starting their own lives.
- ~Parents and college students may have conflicts over structure when going home. College students that have been independent at school, may balk at having a curfew at home.
- ~Parents may get fearful about their “child’s” changing values and their attempts to think for themselves.
- ~Parents and students may be in conflict over expectations that the student come home to “help” with responsibilities, chores, etc.