

Alumni Blog - September 2021

When Stress Moves in, Don't Check Out

College equals instant stress for many students. From figuring out how to pay for college, where your classes are, taking exams, and navigating new atmospheres, college students can face overwhelming amounts of pressure and demands.

While it's normal that students face this kind of stress, studies show that adults between the ages of 18 to 23 are experiencing higher levels of stress due to the COVID pandemic. 90% of this age group reported education as a significant source of stress. There are many uncertainties when it comes to classes and the potential of moving to online learning.

When the demands of college and work become so overwhelming you may feel the need or want to try to finish everything as fast as possible. But that can cause burnout and then you may start to feel self-doubt when hard work isn't giving you the result you wanted. At some point, you begin to feel depressed and that's when you retreat into yourself and shy away from peers and people that you care about. You are frustrated, confused, and lonely. You are *"checked out"*.

It's important for you to hear and know that college life isn't perfect. Entering college, there is a lot of growing anticipation, excitement and expectations placed on the whole experience. You feel wired and energized so you start off the year strong; however, slowly throughout the semester you notice your grades aren't where you necessarily thought that they would be. Just remember that hard work does pay off. This isn't high school. You don't have to have the 4.0 GPA. What matters is that you try and do your best. Although academics is central to college success, don't allow that desire for a 4.0 GPA become your whole life. There are so many opportunities to network and get involved in the community.

You may be feeling a bit lonely while away at college. Even though there are thousands of people surrounding you every day, it can be difficult at times to actually connect with someone. This is not your fault. Unfortunately, this is your first taste of adulthood. It becomes difficult to keep up with people when everyone has such different schedules and responsibilities. However, don't shut down from the prospects of finding friends. It's important to find people you feel the most comfortable with whether you like hanging around people or not. The best way to make friends is in your classes. Strike up a conversation with the person sitting next to you about how you hate science and you are dreading the class or compliment them on their outfit. Utilize some of the student services that your school offers. They can help guide you

to resources and people with shared interests. Don't worry about fitting in. Everyone is feeling the same way you are. Once you get through this transition period you will be able to enjoy your college experience.

Other things that can cause you major stress while you are in college are:

Health- This is a big concern with most students nowadays. Regardless of what the sickness may be, it can be difficult to keep up with your studies. If a particular illness is going around the campus or community, do your best to avoid a lot of contact with anyone who is contagious and wash your hands frequently. If you become sick, take care of yourself and rest as much as possible. If you are contagious, you should avoid going to class unless you are already a distance learner. If you do miss a class, be sure to email your professor to let them know and maybe contact that friends in class to send you their notes for the day so that you aren't so behind.

Finances- Students often work while attending school to keep up with tuition and housing costs. However, many student jobs only pay entry-level wages. If you are struggling economically, speak to your financial aid office to see if you qualify for grants, loans, or a federal work study program. Always keep in mind why you chose to pursue a degree in the first place, and remind yourself that it can lead to better job opportunities after you graduate. In the long-term, college is still worth the investment.

Work Schedules- A lot of students work while attending college, with the average student spending 19 hours a week at work. Try to find a job that can accommodate your full college schedule.

Balancing Work, School and Family- Figuring out this right balance can get complicated and can add to your normal stress...especially if these obligations are so demanding that you fall behind with your schoolwork. Set up boundaries with the different areas of your life. Make sure that everyone knows that your own school work and wellbeing is important. These boundaries will help you give each obligation the proper attention it needs. Keep in mind that it is important to be able to adapt to new concerns and demands. You may feel stressed to a greater extent if you feel like you can't make necessary adjustments to your plans.

Scheduling Classes and Credit Load- Scheduling classes can be one of the most stressful parts of college. Trying to sign up for the courses at the times that work well for you and making sure that you are taking all the necessary prerequisites are just a couple of things that are more than enough to pull your hair out. If you are overwhelmed by your current classes just remember that it isn't permanent. Your classes will end and you will have to build an entirely new schedule. Use that opportunity to make a schedule that's better suited for you and your needs.

Living with Roommates- Many students may not be accustomed to sharing a room with someone else- especially if their roommate is someone they hardly know. This situation can make the normal stress of college life more complicated. If something is bothering, you take the time to sit down with your roommate and have a discussion about it. Discuss boundaries with one another. Just remember that you don't have to be best friends with this person but you do have to be friendly enough to make it work. If the issues between you all get worse speak to your floor RA or apartment managers to see what can be done.

Social Obligations- On top of everything else, the college scene can be a place for peer pressure and societal expectations can prove stressful for new learners. One of the ways to avoid these potential dangerous situations is to be involved in a group of friends where their focus is on school or maybe even a club or sports team. Stay busy and avoid parties where you think drinking and drugs might be involved. Order a pizza and have some friends over for a movie or game night.

Romantic Relationships- These relationships take work. When you and your significant other both experience the stresses of college life, the pressure can seem even greater. Keep your expectations realistic. Healthy relationships are accepting people as they are and not trying to change them. Take the time to communicate and genuinely listen. The most important things are to be flexible and take care of you. Healthy relationships are mutual and give room for the individuals to grow and change.

Preparing for Post-Graduation Life- Being in school is comfortable. After all, you've been doing it your whole life. The prospect of no more school can be scary simply because it is unknown and unfamiliar. For even the most well-prepared student, the unpredictability of life outside of school can be full of anxiety. You may be feeling even more nervous because you don't have any idea what you want to do. Keep in mind that you aren't alone. Don't hesitate to reach out to friends, family, professors, or advisors for help and advice as you start to think about what you want to do after graduation.

Figuring out stressors in your life is only half the battle. There are several ways that you can avoid getting stressed out, reduce the amount of stress you feel in certain situations, and increase your ability to cope with the stress instead of shutting down.

Set realistic expectations for yourself. Constantly having your plate full is the easiest way to get overwhelmed. Try time management and setting realistic expectations so that you avoid over-committing yourself. Remember that you can go to your professor during their office hours and communicate your difficulty.

Don't stay up all night. Getting enough quality sleep can have a variety of health benefits, including reducing stress. Students who sleep well are also less likely to get sick, have better memory recall, and enjoy a clear mind.

Don't smoke, use drugs or drink excessively. Though it may be tempting to reach for that cigarette, vape pen or bottle after a difficult day, it may not be the best way to unwind. These substances may offer stress relief in the short-term but soon their effects wear off and you may find yourself feeling more stressed than before. Researchers have actually found that drinking alcohol can actually increase stress.

It's easy to just eat junk and fast food all day everyday but try to avoid that. Make an effort to eat nutritious meals and avoid eating on the run. If you have a meal plan, use that at the dining halls. Many times you can find healthy options. When you are stressed, you likely either crave comfort food or find that your appetite is gone altogether. Either way, you should try to maintain your regular eating habits when you feel stressed, as eating too much or too little can have a lasting negative effect on your physical health.

Don't spend compulsively. When you're feeling down, your instinct may be to go buy yourself a treat as a pick-me-up (guilty!!!). Buying yourself a gift every once in a while is fine, but if shopping or spending money is your go-to method of relief, you may be creating more stress for yourself by putting a strain on your finances or adding objects you don't really want or need.

Regular exercise not only keeps you healthy, but it also releases endorphins and improves your cognitive ability. Exercise can also help with sleep. Yoga, short walks and stretching can also help relieve tension.

Don't binge on coffee and energy drinks. These will lead to an inevitable crash later on and it increases stress in the body.

DO NOT PROCRASTINATE. While many students swear by waiting until the last minute to write a paper or cram for an exam, this often leads to stress. Avoiding procrastination and managing your time wisely will keep you from aging 10 years from staying up all night and stressing. Place limits on your use of social media or streaming services. The more you scroll, the more you'll fall behind in your work and add to your overall stress.

Realistically, stress cannot be completely avoided. Perhaps one of the best ways to manage stress is to simply deal with the cause of it directly. If your busy schedule is making you anxious, sit down and see what you can change. Surround yourself with people who you like spending time with. Be around people who make you feel comfortable even if you don't talk about what is troubling you. Between your classes, homework and other obligations, take a break. Schedule an afternoon where you don't have to do anything but read your favorite book or watch a movie. You may not be able to drop everything off of your to-do list at once but don't hesitate to spend some time not doing anything. Most importantly, you may find yourself needing more support than you loved ones can offer or understand. Don't hesitate to reach out for help from a professional. Your school likely has many support resources available to help, even if you are an online student.

Stress is inevitable but it doesn't have to dominate your life or college experience. Do your best to understand what kind of stress you are feeling, what's causing it, and how you respond productively. By addressing your stress in a healthy way, you are doing all that you can to make the most out of your college education.