

Managing the Ups and Downs of the College Years

College is a time of huge transitions. As a society, we put a lot of effort into getting students into college, but we fall short in preparing them for the emotional challenge once they get there. According to the 2014 American College Health Association survey, at some point in the past year:

- 33% of college students reported that they had been too depressed to function
- 55% reported overwhelming anxiety
- 49% reported that academics were too difficult to handle

Yet, despite these statistics, college counseling centers only see approximately 10% of their student population, which means many students are struggling on their own.

So what is going on? In addition to numerous stressors – developing new friendships, break ups, roommate issues, and tough course work to name a few – the late adolescent brain undergoes significant changes and growth during the college years. In fact, the end of adolescence is officially around 26, when the frontal cortex (where judgment and intellectual reasoning occur) is fully formed and myelination (which increases the speed in which neurons communicate with each other) is complete. Prior to adulthood, adolescents make decisions based on the emotional processing center of the brain, the amygdala, which is responsible for perceptions of fear, anger and pleasure. Adult decision-making is based on the more mature frontal cortex. In short, there is a good reason your college aged adolescent behaves the way he or she does.

What to Expect During Break

Your student may come home for winter break feeling exhausted. The first few weeks of vacation are often a time to decompress, catch up on sleep, and reconnect with old friends. There may be new family tensions as your child experienced more independence while at school. Before going back to school, discussing what went well over the break and revisiting some ground rules, such as curfews and household expectations, might be a good idea.

At some point, grades arrive and this can be very difficult for some students if the results aren't as anticipated. It's unrealistic to expect a college student to maintain a 4.0 average even if they were able to do so in high school. Sometimes students don't do well because they have high school level study skills, poor time management, numerous distractions, or underlying emotional concerns. Students frequently seek counseling because they report they can't concentrate or don't feel motivated.

If your student experiences the following symptoms, it's important to assess your child for depression and anxiety:

- Change in sleep or appetite
- Racing thoughts, not being able to turn off their brain
- Low energy and motivation
- Loss of interest in prior activities
- Difficulty concentrating
- Withdrawal
- Feeling revved up
- Sadness, irritability, or anger

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- Hopelessness
- Thoughts of suicide

College students who are struggling often think they are the only one who is suffering. This belief can amplify difficult emotions and increase the sense of isolation. The reality is everyone struggles.

How to be Supportive

Check in with your student about how the semester went. This is a good chance to voice concerns you may have. It will be a more productive conversation if you are empathetic. Empathic listening creates a safe environment in which to express oneself. Here are some listening tips:

- Resist the urge to lecture
- Hold off on judgments
- Express your concern *and* ask an open ended question. For example, “I’m really concerned about you. You have seemed irritable over the past few weeks. Can you tell me what’s going on?”
- Reflect back what you hear. If your child says, “School has been tough,” respond with, “So school has been really rough this past semester.” Reflective listening encourages conversation.

If you still have concerns, ask if your student has considered counseling.

What to Expect Regarding Counseling

Often students say they went to a counseling session but it didn’t make things better. Setting expectations for counseling is important. Just as one would not expect results after working out once or twice, the same can be said for therapy. Looking at oneself can be very challenging. In fact, there are so many ways people distract themselves from feeling any internal discomfort – alcohol, drugs, shopping, internet, porn, gaming, eating, purging, over-exercising – that the distractions themselves negatively impact lives.

During the first counseling session, the counselor discusses the student’s concerns and takes a complete history. The second visit entails developing a treatment plan. During these first two sessions, the student and counselor are developing rapport that additional therapy sessions build upon.

Returning to Campus

Keep the following tips in mind when your child returns to campus:

- Let your student know that it’s okay to fail or at least get an occasional C! Students today equate their self-worth with achievement. As Thomas Edison once said, I have not failed. I’ve just found 10,000 ways that won’t work.
- Remind your child that it’s okay to make mistakes. Many students have an all-or-nothing attitude and think any mistake means failure. Anyone who has never made a mistake has never tried anything new, said Albert Einstein. Some of life’s greatest lessons come from our mistakes. In fact, college is a great time to get outside one’s comfort zone.

- Go online and learn about the counseling center website. It might be called the wellness center or student development center or behavioral health center. Learn about walk-in times and intake procedures.
- It is normal for first year students to be homesick. Encourage them to contact the counseling center if they are calling you daily. The counseling center can help them with the transition.
- Realize that you can't force your child to go to do well in school or to go to counseling. Sometimes students need to take time off. In fact, more colleges are encouraging "gap" years so that students have time to develop coping skills and become more mature.
- If you have concerns about your child, consult with the counseling center. They can offer suggestions on how to reach out to your child.
- Let your child know if there is a history of mental health issues on either side of the family. This is especially important if there is a history of addiction.
- Sometimes it might make sense to have a medication consult especially if a student's functioning is impaired. Despite the continued stigma, medications can often help significantly.
- If you ever worry that your child is thinking about suicide, ASK. You are not giving your child the idea, a common myth that continues to persist!
- Add the campus police number to your phone. If you ever have serious concerns about your child (i.e., they make a threat) ask the campus police to do a well-being check.

For some, college lives up to the expectation that "It's the best years of your life." However, the majority of students find this time to be complicated, with many personal, relational, and academic challenges. It's important to validate this experience so your child knows he/she is not alone and that there is help. As a parent, navigating the balance between encouraging independence while maintaining connection brings its own challenges.

Additional Campus Resources

Here are additional campus resources to be aware of, although the names might be slightly different depending on the college:

- Academic Advising offers tutoring and academic coaching. This office often acts as a liaison between students, other departments and faculty.
- Office of Disability Services (ODS) can assist with academic accommodations based on The Americans with Disability Act. If your student had an existing Independent Education Plan or 504 plan, the ODS should be notified. If experiencing mental health issues, students sometimes take a medical leave or a reduced course load. Even if a student has medical complications (concussion syndrome, broken leg), the ODS can assist.
- Dean of Students (DOS) is a great resource if you are unsure where to turn.

If you need additional information or would like to speak with a counselor, please call the EAP at [800-648-9557](tel:800-648-9557) or visit us at www.kgreer.com. We are available 24/7 to assist with your concerns.

Source: Julie Glovin, LICSW