

Recognizing and addressing stress and other mental health issues

December 2 2010, By Jessica Otitigbe

The middle of the college semester has come and gone, marking the halfway point for many students enrolled at colleges and universities across the country. Starting classes, meeting peers, and exploring a new geographical area all at once may seem intimidating for first-year and prospective students who are making the transition to college/campus life.

To lessen the stress and help make the transition to college life comfortable, Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute's Keith Anderson, a nationally recognized expert in the area of counseling and student mental health and a staff psychologist in Rensselaer's Gallagher Student Health Center for more than 16 years, answers questions and offers some tips on navigating the vexing questions students and parents have about stress and mental health.

What are some of the challenges that I will encounter when adjusting to college?

Adjusting to college life can be a difficult transition for many young men and women. For many students, the change from living at home to living on a college campus can be both thrilling and daunting. Being able to manage this transition is an important part of being academically successful.

While you may crave independence from parents, some of you may not

feel ready to move away from parents and your friends at home. You may look forward to being ‘on your own,’ but others may have difficulty handling the autonomy that comes with the territory. As a result, you may begin to develop a lifestyle that is not conducive to academic success: having an ineffective sleep schedule, excessive Internet/computer use, missing classes, and possibly experimenting with drugs and alcohol. If you are less ready to move away, you may be distracted by feeling homesick, spend long periods of time on the phone with parents or friends from home, and you may have difficulty engaging in the college environment.

How can I adjust to campus life?

“The transition from home to campus/college life takes time, so be patient. This adjustment can be made easier by finding ways to engage yourself with the campus community. The residence life staff and other campus professionals can also help you to find ways to increase your participation with other students and in the campus community.”

“Parents can also help their student(s) in the process by staying in contact with them. You can also learn how to use other forms of communication such as e-mail or texting. It’s OK to check in with your sons or daughters on a regular basis to see how they are doing. If you sense that they are struggling, be supportive and encourage them to seek help. Staying in contact with friends at home can be an effective support system, but meeting new people in your campus environment is also important. After you have become familiar with the campus environment, consider participating in a club or organization that will provide opportunities for relaxation and socializing with other students.”

What if I have a history of treatment for a mental condition?

“Various studies have drawn attention to the growing mental health needs of [students](#) and the positive impact of counseling services on college student success. Once you select your college/university, check in with your counseling or health center so that you can establish a personal connection. Having made contact before a crisis occurs may make it easier to feel more comfortable in that setting and will help you to keep track of your treatment plan.”

What is the effect of drug and alcohol abuse?

“Drug and alcohol use can affect many aspects of a student’s life. Binge drinking — defined as five drinks in two hours for men and four drinks in two hours for women — often occurs in the college population and can have many negative effects on health and academic performance.

“If you binge drink, you are more likely to engage in a variety of risky behaviors you might otherwise avoid. In addition to reducing your inhibitions, alcohol and other drugs can make it more difficult to fall asleep, more difficult to concentrate, and may result in you missing classes or assignments. Use of recreational drugs may also lead to a series of unintended consequences, including problems with addiction and withdrawal as well as financial difficulty.”

If I have a problem with drugs or alcohol, what can I do?

“Drug and alcohol abuse is usually best diagnosed by a professional with training in substance abuse. If you have concerns about your substance abuse, you can usually arrange for a confidential evaluation by contacting the university’s student health center.”

What is academic stress?

“Academic stress is a common problem on any college campus. Academic stress is often the result of being overly concerned about classes and grades. This type of stress is more likely to occur if you find yourself not keeping up with your academic responsibilities. Falling behind in homework and not attending classes often result in increases in academic stress or anxiety. You may also notice yourself feeling more stressed by your attempts to replicate the high grades you received in high school. This type of self-imposed pressure can also result in stress that may influence your academic performance. When you experience a great deal of stress you may notice one or more of the following symptoms: frequent headaches, irritability, difficulty concentrating, difficulty falling asleep, feeling overwhelmed, cold hands/feet, stomach distress, and difficulty eating.”

How do I deal with academic stress?

“College is a completely different environment than high school. It may have been easier to get good grades in high school, perhaps even with little effort. The college environment often requires dramatic changes in study and work habits. Reducing academic [stress](#) is often helped by ensuring that you are avoiding procrastination and developing effective study habits. It is often helpful to examine your beliefs about your academic performance and ensure that you keep a realistic perspective about the issue. You should also explore the programs and services offered by your university advising or learning assistance center.”

How can I cope with test anxiety?

“With mid-terms (finals) almost upon us, this is on every student’s mind. Test anxiety is a specific type of worry that is usually caused by concerns about your performance on an exam. While some may think that this type of anxiety is just in your head, test anxiety has the same symptoms

of other forms of anxiety: rapid breathing, clammy hands, a racing heart, and a sense of doom or distress. When you experience test anxiety you may notice that your test performance does not match your preparation for the test. Ironically, the concerns you have about your test performance are very likely to impair the performance. Most forms of anxiety involve difficulty with concentration and memory, two very important keys to academic success. Treating test anxiety can involve developing strategies to reduce concerns about academic performance and teaching relaxation skills and usually requires your awareness that you have prepared for the exam.”

More information: To view the paper, *Considerations for Integration of Counseling and Health Services on College and University Campuses*, visit: www.acha.org/Publications/Guidelines/WhitePapers.cfm .

Provided by Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute

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