

Experts offer simple solutions to defeat back-to-school stress

August 26 2015, by Jane Kelly



Getting organized early, while the workload is relatively lighter, can make life easier when mid-terms hit later in the semester. Credit: Dan Addison

Back-to-school time can be a source of stress: routines are altered, new responsibilities arrive, and often students must adjust to new roommates.

Tim Davis, the director of University of Virginia Counseling and Psychological Services, said there are some very simple things students should do in their early days to smooth the transition.

"I think of the first two to three weeks on Grounds is a 'golden time,'" he said. "It is so critical for setting the stage for a happy, productive rest of the year."

Map it out

If he had two minutes with first-year and transfer students, Davis said he would urge them to take the relatively low-intensity time to break down their syllabi. "Get all the due dates on your calendars, look at every significant project in all five classes, break it down into smaller projects and assign dates to all those things," he said.

Students should treat school like a job, and Davis likened it to punching a time card.

"Look at each week and see what you need to be doing to keep those large projects going, even if they are not due for a couple of months," he said. "Know when you are going to study for each class during the day, block it off and stick to it no matter what."

Davis knows from experience that this approach can save a lot of heartburn. Counseling and Psychological Services, or CAPS, sees its highest numbers of students in October, when the onset of mid-terms brings on study-related stress.

"People realize that they are not ready, that they are behind, that they've blown those first few weeks and they can't make it all up," he said.

If students do the early work and get organized, Davis said their class

and study time should only amount to about 45 hours a week. "You haven't even bitten into your nights or weekends. Think of all the time you have left over for other enjoyable things."

Be nice to yourself

Peter Sheras, a professor in U.Va.'s Curry School of Education, said meeting new people can also cause stress. "For lots of folks, they don't know many people, so they have to make new friends and that can be really stressful for them," he said.

An expert in adolescence and stress, Sheras advises first-year and transfer students to "be nice to yourself. Take your time. Almost everybody is new," he said. "We forget that and assume everyone knows everything," he said, and that is never the case.

A good way to learn more about the environment is to reach out to an authority figure, be it a residence hall adviser or a member of the faculty. "Faculty love students and they love these kinds of interactions," Sheras said. "Try not to be shy. If it's a question for you, it's not stupid."

One way to make the unfamiliar more familiar is to bring something that you enjoyed at home to U.Va. "If you are a runner, find a route and some people to run with so that you feel that some part of your life is not completely disrupted," Sheras suggested.

With 89 percent of the Class of 2019 finishing in the top 10 percent of their high school graduating classes, it is easy to arrive on Grounds and feel academically inferior. Don't.

"Give yourself a chance to fit in academically," he said. "People come from different academic backgrounds and you can all be here from day one with very different academic preparation."

"That's not good or bad. It just takes some adjustment – give yourself a semester to settle in."

Students should also build some down time into their schedules, Sheras said. "A little time in your day where you can just explore or do something that is fun and relaxing" is important, be it a walk in a pavilion garden or shopping on the Downtown Mall.

College is not a destination, but a beginning. "You are at a trailhead," he said.

Christian Steinmetz, an expert in higher education and assistant professor at the Curry School, agreed.

"It's so powerful to think about the amount and growth and change that occurs for these [students](#) in these four years," she said. "They will change in amazing ways, and this is a critical time for them to be exploring and making great friends."

Provided by University of Virginia

Citation: Experts offer simple solutions to defeat back-to-school stress (2015, August 26) retrieved 26 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2015-08-experts-simple-solutions-defeat-back-to-school.html>

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