

Adjusting To College

First year students usually have expectations about college life long before actually leaving home. Some students look forward to college, and are eager to experience more freedom and adventure. Other individuals may be enthusiastic about college initially, but then discover that the actual experience falls short of their expectations. They may not feel happy, comfortable, or secure in their new environment. And there are some students who know that leaving home will be difficult and, therefore, dread the thought of packing and going to college. No matter what the expectations, nearly every student encounters challenging experiences or obstacles at the beginning of college that they didn't anticipate. Even positive life changes produce stress, and certainly the changes involved in leaving home for college are demanding and can lead to varying emotions including sadness, loneliness and worry. These feelings are typical and part of the normal developmental transition to college.

Changes to Expect in the First Year of College

Increased personal freedom

Many students welcome the freedom to make their own decisions about what they want to do each day while in college. Others may find this level of freedom to be strangely unfamiliar or difficult. First year students who live on campus may maintain daily or frequent contact with family by way of phone or computer, but they make many more personal decisions and choices than they did in high school.

Increased responsibility

Along with an increase in personal freedom is greater responsibility for one's daily schedule. First year students must make choices about when and how to study, socialize with new acquaintances, become involved in activities, budget money, exercise, and make time to eat and sleep. They are faced with the challenge of learning how to balance going to class, participating in activities, completing schoolwork on time, taking basic care of oneself, and having fun as well. Students are faced, often for the first time, with the need to take more initiative to address responsibilities (e.g. scheduling classes, buying personal items, making appointments to take care of health needs, asking professors and staff for assistance or help).

Managing time

First year students typically experience changing demands on their time. Days are less routine and predictable. Some first year students feel they have virtually no time for themselves because of the time and energy needed to manage multiple obligations. College classes may seem difficult and draining, and/or may involve more hours of studying. However, other students may find the academic workload manageable, but then feel they have too much free time that isn't relaxing or comfortable.

Different surroundings and relationships at college

First year students have to adjust to new surroundings, and relate to unfamiliar people. Other students often seem very different from family, friends and acquaintances from home. First year students who live away from home typically have to learn to relate to and negotiate conflicts with new roommates. There may be the hope that one's roommate will be a close friend, and it can be disappointing when this kind of relationship does not develop. First year students also experience new expectations from adults at college.

For example, professors typically do not call if a class is missed, but will likely grade for attendance. In college, there is usually less interaction between parents and the school, and students are faced with the need to work out problems or concerns directly with professors, Residence Life, etc.

Changing relationships with family and friends from home

As students experience more freedom and responsibility in college, relationships with parents and other significant people change. First year students, as well as their parents, may fear losing aspects of their relationship with each other. Frequent calls home from students are common, especially during the first few months away at college. It may be very hard to say goodbye at the end of holiday or semester breaks. It may also be difficult to re-adjust to rules at home, such as curfews, chores or responsibilities for younger siblings. It is important to point out that parents also need to adjust during this period. They are dealing with their child becoming more independent in some ways, but still needing them too.

Many students leave high school boyfriends or girlfriends when they go to college. There may be disagreement about whether it is ok to make new friends or see other people. One, or both, partners may struggle with feeling lonely, sad, or jealous, especially if the other partner seems to be happier and adjusting better.

First year students may also find that their relationships with friends from home are different after the time away at school. Some individuals feel closer and more appreciative of friends at home, and may stay very connected to them. Other students find they have less in common with friends from home after being away at school, or may be hurt by a friend becoming distant with them after high school.

“What do I do if I’m not happy at college?”

It is a common cliché that “the college years are supposed to be the best years of your life.” If you are a first year student who is feeling upset and miserable, this can be a very confusing and scary expectation. It is important to remember that it is normal to feel sad and scared during the first several weeks of college. You are in a new, demanding environment and everything is different. You may feel like you are expected to “grow up” all at once, and this may feel depressing or even overwhelming. You may feel far away from the people who usually are there to love and support you. Or, perhaps you are a student who does not feel “homesick” per se, but feels disappointed in the people you are meeting or the lack of reciprocity by others in initiating activities or friendships. If you are a first year student who is distressed, you may see other students seeming happy and optimistic. But it may surprise you to hear that lots of other first year students are scared and sad, even if they don’t obviously show it or admit it.

If you are struggling with the transition to college, there are some things you can do to help yourself make the adjustment:

- Reach out to others in your residence hall. You are likely to find that you are not the only one who is sad and upset. Your R.A. is a good resource to talk to and to help you figure out how to cope. Upperclassmen may also be eager to share with you experiences of their own difficulty adjusting to college life during their freshmen year.
- Join campus organizations and clubs that appeal to you. These activities do not have to be a perfect match for you, but can still help you to meet and interact with others who share similar interests and/or may also be looking to meet friends outside the dorm environment.

- Make an extra effort to take care of yourself, including making time to rest, eat balanced meals, exercise and avoid abuse of alcohol or other drugs. Try to develop a manageable schedule, including identifying your optimal place and time in the day to study.
- Adjust your expectations if things are not working out as you planned. For example, your roommate might not be your best friend. You may need to initiate conversations about conflict over personal space and living habits. Try to give yourself some time to adjust. Recognize that relationships take time to develop (e.g. most students' friendships from home formed over a period of years), and that your surroundings will become more familiar over time.
- Seek out resources on campus that can help you address problems and get support, both academically and personally. These varied resources include your advisor, professors, the Counseling Center, Residence Life staff, Center for Faith and Spirituality, Health Services, and Career Services. Each of these resources will also assist in connecting you with other helpful resources on campus.

The Counseling Center

The Counseling Center offers caring, confidential help from trained professionals who are experienced in helping many first year students cope with the adjustment to college. If you are a first year student having difficulty sleeping or eating, or feeling lonely, sad, "a sense of doom" anxiety, or panic, call 386-6035 or stop by Building 20 to schedule an appointment.