

Yikes! I'm Heading Off to College

Don't leave home without these survival tips



By Hal Pickett, Psy.D., LP, ABPP, Child and Adolescent Psychology

If you (or your child) are about to head off to college, you're likely in the midst of an array of mixed emotions – anticipation about an exciting new chapter, anxiety about the unknown, and much more. Even the most positive transitions can be fraught with stress and anxiety. But there are things you can do to help navigate and make as smooth a transition as possible.

First and foremost, know that what you're going through is normal. There's no question that freshman year is stressful. Even if you're a well-prepared student, the transition to independent life is stressful. Be aware of that. You are not going crazy; you are just in the middle of a big life transition. It will get easier and better as you go along.

Before you go

- *Transition together:* Many colleges offer freshman transition programs where freshmen live together, study together and provide each other support. Ask about this at the college you're attending. These arrangements can be very helpful.
- *Read up:* Read everything you can about the college you're going to attend. Try to set up coffee with fellow students in your hometown who already know the ropes of your new college and can give you their advice – and also be a familiar face when you arrive on campus.
- *Eat in:* If your college has a meal program, check it out. In the middle of stressful exams, it can be one less thing to worry about.

When you arrive

- *Tour the city* around the college with your parents. Locate grocery stores, drug stores, fast food restaurants, banks, hospital emergency rooms, shopping malls, etc. Check out the public transportation system, especially if you've never ridden a bus or subway before.
- *Prepare to negotiate:* Moving into a dorm room or apartment with a roommate is stressful. Even if it's your best friend from high school. Be prepared to negotiate a lot of things like sleeping habits, eating habits, study habits, television viewing, snoring, drinking, smoking, weekend visitors and other things that you cannot yet imagine.

Create a manageable schedule

- *Be realistic:* If you have a difficult time getting up in the morning without your parent dragging you out of bed, don't sign up for 8 o'clock classes. It's very tempting to skip classes in college; do not fall into this hole.
- *Start slowly:* For example, take the minimal credit hours your first semester. You can always make up the credit hours later when you get used to college life. Start out with classes you're used to, like freshman English, biology, and college algebra. Don't take aeronautical engineering just because it sounds interesting.
- *Schedule partying time:* There is plenty of time for everything. You can learn to study and read during the day between classes. You do not need to party every night. Two to three nights a week is plenty.

Don't be surprised if...

- *You feel like you've made the biggest mistake of your life.* You are not alone. More than 50% of freshmen feel this way during the early days of college. It does go away.
- *You get homesick.* Join the crowd – everyone does. Hang in there; it will go away. The sooner you develop a social support group, the more at home you will begin to feel. Join groups and go to social gatherings the dorm or college plans for freshmen.

Avoid these pitfalls

- *Gamers, beware:* Mom is not there to tell you to stop. If you flunk out of school because you forgot to stop playing World of Warcraft, you'll be back home fighting with your parents and siblings for computer time. (If you think you're going to make video games your life, make sure your college has that as a degree option. These programs are very specialized, and a company will not hire you because you can tell them how many hours you can play without taking a bathroom break.)
- *Do not get behind!* There is no one making sure you do your homework, so do not let it slide. Trying to read 300 pages of biology the night before a test is impossible. You know this. Do not get stupider when you get to college!

- *Manage your money:* If you have trouble managing your money, multiple that times 10 and that will be the trouble you have managing money your freshman year in college. Plan for this and work with your parents to make smart money decisions, like limited debit withdrawals per month, etc.

Seek support when you need it

- If you have had mental health issues in the past, you are at a greater risk to have an exacerbation of the problems freshman year. Pay attention to the early warning signs and get help *early*. Most schools offer on-campus counseling centers.
- If you have learning or mental health concerns, contact the college's student disabilities office. You do not need to have a disability; this is the office that can provide support for your academics if you get behind, need special accommodations, etc.

Remember, college is fun. There is a lot more to learn than just your school subjects. You have to make the grades to stay in, so don't be a slacker. But there are other great things to do as well: Saturday afternoon football games, intramurals, parties, great arts attractions and more. Not to mention enlightening dorm hallway conversations and the establishment of lifelong friendships. Use the time to expand your horizons and your mind. It is a special and privileged time of life; do not waste it. You will not get this opportunity again.

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In his spare time, Hal likes to be physically active and manage his menagerie of dogs.