



NEW JERSEY PSYCHOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION

College - A Time of Change

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College is idealized as “the best time in life” and it does offer wonderful opportunities for intellectual, social and emotional growth as well as for fun. The glowing descriptions can gloss over the huge developmental changes and many challenges the typical freshman will face.

New friends, weekend parties, sports, clubs, dating, and interesting classes beckon. Less talked about are possible feelings of being homesick, anxiety, roommate problems, time management, and other adjustment issues. **It can help to approach college realistically.** Likely there will be good times, good people and good classes. But, there will also be stressful times, people you may not like, people who may not like you, and classes you can't wait to finish.

As exciting as it may be to have all these changes, it is also often stressful to go from familiar surroundings and routines to something very new and somewhat less structured. Back to school time was always an adjustment, but **going away to college for the first time brings a whole new stage of life.**

For students with learning disabilities, ADD or other learning issues, adjustment has some special challenges. In high school, the teachers, learning specialists, and parents were involved in helping you get the accommodations you may have needed. In college, **self-advocacy is essential!** Now, whether it is a set of notes, outlines, or PowerPoints, extended time for tests, special tutors, and other support services, you will need to make sure to provide the necessary documents to professors and get yourself to all special or support services.

Scheduling is a big change for everyone. High school classes are usually on a regular daily schedule and form a basis for organizing the school week. In college, there are a myriad of courses to choose among and classes meet at different times and on different days. Each student needs to devise a schedule that works well for everything from homework, studying, and relaxation to basics like eating and sleeping. Often it can be helpful to create a written schedule and use some combination of a planner, a calendar, or an app. When homework or studying is on the schedule, it should be attended to like a class not pushed aside for socializing.

Getting enough sleep and eating healthy meals and snacks are essential to both emotional and academic success. Lack of sleep can cause poor concentration, and affect your mood, and immune system. Figure out what works for you. The timing is up to you but try to get the 7-9

hours of sleep that research shows most of us need to function well. Family meals and a stocked fridge used to help with food basics, but now you will need to do this on your own. If you have a meal plan, search out the healthy choices that you like. Often there is a fridge in the dorm or even a small one you can rent for your dorm room. This is ideal for storing healthy treats and snacks.

Exercise has been shown to be important for emotional as well as physical health. It's easier if you participate in a sport or enjoy working out, but also possible by scheduling time for long walks or finding a yoga or other exercise class on campus. Exercise helps both anxiety and depression. Consider different options: most campuses have a pool, as well as club sports, team sports, and even dorm sports in some instances. All can be done without being a star athlete. Most colleges usually have well equipped gyms available for all students.

You are likely to have a roommate. This may be a complete stranger or someone you met through an event or website for admitted students. You are now sharing your room that is usually a pretty small living area. One key to freshman happiness is establishing a good roommate relationship. This person does not have to end up being your new best friend but you do want to get along reasonably well. Often you may be able to Skype, Facetime, or text with a new roommate before you even arrive on campus. Start by having a conversation about each of your lifestyles and guidelines for living together. There are forms online you can access that may be helpful as guides to what you need to discuss. Sleep and study schedules, noise/music levels, guest and company policies, keeping the room neat, and many other issues will come up. Each of you wants to be comfortable in your dorm room so it is important to be both open and flexible about your own needs and preferences. **It can help to have a problem-solving attitude.** Unexpected things will happen (you may wake up to find your roommate in her bed with a new friend). Drinking and drugs can be an issue. Establishing a relationship of open, ongoing communication is really important. Speaking up tactfully and honestly is better than letting tension build. A resident advisor, usually a more senior student, might be helpful in resolving conflicts that are hard to solve.

If adjustment issues and homesickness are normal, **how do you know when to get help?** In the first few weeks so much is new that some anxiety is normal. Anxiety is your body's way of telling you to be alert, pay attention and take care of yourself. This is one of the reasons colleges have trained upper class students in the freshman dorms as advisors and professionally staffed counseling centers. If anxiety persists beyond a few weeks or homesickness is not lessening as you become involved in campus life, speak to your dorm advisor or consider counseling. College counseling centers, usually free to students, can offer individual or group therapy to help students adjust and cope effectively. The focus is usually college related issues and short term psychotherapy. The college counseling staff can refer you for ongoing psychotherapy if needed. Just as you would go to Health Services for a physical problem that was not improving, head to Student Counseling for upsetting feelings that are not improving.

I see many college students in my practice, especially starting in September and October. One thing I often suggest is to **stick to your own routines and to your current values.** That refers to sleeping and eating but also to friendship, sex, alcohol, and drugs. There can be a wish to explore

everything and to enjoy much more freedom than when living at home. But by staying with the familiar for a little while you get to observe your options and choose sensibly rather than following a “partying” or “herd” mentality.

By all means be social! Start with your dorm. Often resident advisors will have activities to make it easier for the dorm to be a social base. Go to parties but go to meet people more than to drink. Try out clubs and see if you find a group of like-minded people. Get involved in student government (even at the dorm level) if you like leading. It’s also fine to join someone at a cafeteria table, after asking if they would mind. Ask someone interesting to go for coffee after a class together. And allow some alone time; we all need it.

If you have experienced emotional or mental health issues at home, you may want to locate a good therapist near your college. It can be a good idea to have a session to meet this person “just in case” or, you might decide to plan on continuing at school if you are in psychotherapy at home. Your current therapist or the student counseling center can be good resources for referrals to psychologists familiar with the college experience.

Technology is terrific. But scanning your phone for updates and using it to stay constantly in touch with old friends can get in the way of making new connections. Continually texting parents and siblings can also be an obstacle to focusing on your new experiences. **It can be useful to discuss and plan how often you will touch base with parents and family members.** And it’s fine to talk with old friends, but looking up and around is crucial to meeting new people and learning your way around your new environment. If you are buried in your phone you will miss lots of opportunities. Also remember that it often helps to limit screen time one hour before bed to allow your eyes and body to adjust for better sleep.

Adjusting to college will take time, and I always encourage my college-age clients to be kind to themselves. Give yourself emotional space and accept that some anxiety, homesickness, even sadness is part of a process that includes lots of new and exciting things too. You cannot get anything new in life without giving up some of the old and familiar. It may take some time and effort but you will find your own individual way in this new college world.