

NEWS

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Students Need to Mind Their Health

The start of a new school year can bring about a number of emotions for you as a college student. For first-year students, it marks a time of change and excitement. For returning undergraduates, it's a time to see old friends, meet new professors, and more importantly, it puts you one year closer to graduation! When classes start, and the school year kicks into gear, all of the usual stressors – school work, extra curricular activities, and social relationships – begin to surface. Being stressed is a part of life, especially during college. Last year, 85 percent of students reported that they experienced stress on a daily basis, according to an MtvU/Associated Press poll¹. But given the recent economic downturn, college students have extra stress, like financial woes, part-time job responsibilities, and concerns about job prospects after graduation.

We want to remind undergrads how important it is to manage their health. When things get tough, consider these tips:

Watch your drinking.

Always remember that alcohol is a depressant. It may be tempting to use alcohol to relieve your stress, but remember that it is a temporary fix. More than 25 percent of college students report academic problems linked to alcohol use², which may end up increasing your stress level. If you choose to drink, set limits for yourself.

Watch your spending. Like most college students, you are probably on a tight budget. Be wary of credit cards. This may seem like a quick fix now, especially if you need to purchase textbooks and school supplies, but the credit balance will sneak up on you and affect your credit score down the line. College undergraduates have an average credit card balance of \$3,173.3 so avoid the lure of plastic now. It will pay off in the future. If you are working part-time, try to set up direct-deposit accounts so you aren't tempted to cash that check and head to the mall.

Plan your day carefully. Buy a planner or make a calendar on your computer. This simple tool can help organize your days, and may take some of the pressure off when you're figuring out how to balance schoolwork, job or athletic responsibilities, and a social life.

Take study breaks. You may really want to ace that test, and think the only way of accomplishing that is to turn your brain into liquid mush. Sometimes forcing too much, too fast can be just as stressful. If you're finding it harder to retain information, or if you feel like you've read that last paragraph three times and still don't understand it, take a break. Rest your mind, give it a quick change of pace, and then return to your studies a little later.

Get some sleep. Cramming the night before an exam may seem like a logical idea. You did it in high school, so why not now? However, when your alarm wakes you up for your 8:00 a.m. test, you might regret it. Sacrificing much needed sleep can take an immediate toll on your mood. Sleep itself is not a stress reliever, but getting a good night's sleep regenerates your body and your mind.

Build healthy eating habits. Eat breakfast! It's the body's first chance to refuel. Missing this meal can cause unstable blood sugar levels, leading to mood swings, fatigue, and poor concentration. Eating protein-rich snacks throughout the day also helps to maintain blood sugar levels.

Get involved. Attend your school's student activities fair and consider joining some extracurricular student groups, if you haven't already. Not only will you make new friends and spend time doing something you enjoy, these groups can be a great way to alleviate some of the stress of schoolwork by giving you something else to think about.

Communicate with your roommate. Living with another person can be challenging, even if you were friends before you became roommates. Work through conflicts before they blow up. Regularly communicate with your roommate, and set rules for the room that you both can agree on.

Stay connected. First-year students and even some upperclassmen struggle with homesickness. Keep in touch with your family and old friends, but make sure not to isolate yourself from making new friends at school.

Don't be afraid to ask for help. It's hard to admit you're struggling when you think you're expected to have your life in order. Know that you aren't the only one struggling. College is a difficult time with many challenges. In the fall 2008 ACHA-NCHA II survey, 87 percent of college students reported feeling overwhelmed by all that they had to do. When it gets to the point where you feel you're in a pressure-cooker, it is time to reach out to someone who can give professional guidance. Sharing your feelings reduces isolation and helps you realize that you are not alone.

Remember...

If at any point, you are concerned that a friend may be thinking of hurting themselves, it is important for you to reach out for help. Call 1-800-273-TALK (8255) to reach a 24-hour crisis center or dial 911 for immediate assistance. For more information on helping a friend or yourself cope with mental health problems, call Mental Health America of

Franklin County at 614-221-1441 and we'll help you navigate the mental health system and get you the help you need.

1. mtvU and Associated Press 2009 "Economy, College Stress, and Mental Health" Poll: <http://www.jedfoundation.org/about/jed-news/New-mtvU-Associated-Press-Poll-Shows-How-Stress-Economy-Other-Factors-Are-Affecting-College-Students-Mental-Health>.
2. A Snapshot of Annual High-Risk College Drinking Consequences: <http://www.collegedrinkingprevention.gov/StatsSummaries/snapshot.aspx>.
3. How Undergraduate Students Use Credit Cards: Sallie Mae's National Study of Usage Rates and Trends, 2009: <http://www.salliemae.com/NR/rdonlyres/0BD600F1-9377-46EA-AB1F-6061FC763246/10744/SLMCreditCardUsageStudy41309FINAL2.pdf>.
4. ACHA-NCHA II Fall 2008 Survey: http://www.acha-ncha.org/reports_ACHA-NCHAI.html

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Mental Health America of Franklin County is a private, not-for-profit organization, established in 1956. We are dedicated to promoting mental health in Franklin County through advocacy, education, and support services. Our programs include: information and referral to community mental health and alcohol/drug services; support groups for people with mental illness and their families; an Ombudsman program that assists clients in navigating the mental health and alcohol/drug system; mental health screenings in English and Spanish; community and professional mental health education and a newsletter for first-time parents available in both English and Spanish. We receive funding from the Franklin County ADAMH Board and United Way of Central Ohio. To become a member or find out more information, please visit us online at www.mhafc.org.

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