

Why Am I So Stressed Out About College and What Can I Do About It?

By Peggy L. Ferguson, Ph.D.

Leaving home for college marks one of life's most exhilarating yet stressful chapters. You expect significant change in your life and know that you need to learn new skills, so you hit the ground running. Amidst the whirlwind of unfamiliar experiences, you may move back and forth between excitement and anxiety, questioning your readiness for the challenges ahead and, inevitably, feeling stressed.

Stress is a natural response when evaluating whether the demands of a situation surpass your internal and external resources. As you embark on your college career, the extent of your resources and the actual demands remain unknown. Beyond academic concerns, you may feel anxious about the uncertainties of forging new connections, managing time between academic and social pursuits, and questioning your self-discipline. The beginning of the semester starts with self-questioning-- am I making good decisions? Am I doing what I am supposed to be doing to be successful? Unlike before, you lack immediate parental support, which traditionally offers immediate answers to those questions and serves as a cornerstone of your support system.

Stress, with its psychological, emotional, and physical symptoms, can hinder your ability to leverage the resources needed to meet the challenges of this new chapter. However, you can effectively manage and even reduce your stress. Worry often contributes to stress but can be replaced with proactive problem-solving once you identify the underlying concerns.

If your worry is related to a controllable issue, like struggling in a chemistry class due to a perceived lack of aptitude, identifying fear of failure and low self-efficacy as the source enables you to apply problem-solving techniques. Possible solutions may include:

- Getting a tutor.
- Practicing cognitive therapy to overcome negative self-talk.
- Finding additional resources.
- Adjusting study habits.

Transitioning from worry to problem-solving fosters a sense of reduced stress, increased hopefulness, and greater confidence. Explore the resources available to students. There is shame in asking for help.

Stress encompasses emotional, psychological, and even spiritual dimensions. Cognitive therapy can address emotional and psychological contributions, challenging automatic assessments and promoting alternative, less stressful perspectives. An example would be replacing "what if..." thoughts with neutral or positive perspectives. During heightened stress, individuals may rigidly adhere to established courses of action, limiting their openness to alternative resources like prayer and support systems. Slowing down, rethinking, and regrouping become crucial for approaching stress management in a comprehensive way that integrates physical, emotional, psychological, and spiritual aspects.

Other tools, such as physical relaxation techniques, are crucial in stress management. Breathing exercises, guided imagery, progressive muscle relaxation, physical activity, music, mindfulness, and creative endeavors can contribute to overall well-being.

Make sure that your stress management activities are healthy ones. Binge drinking, emotional eating, compulsive video games, isolation, and withdrawal are but a few of the non-helpful behaviors that people use to reduce their anxiety, feelings of overwhelm, and other uncomfortable feelings. These defenses against discomfort are not only not helpful, they are self-sabotaging and tend to create more distress.

Leaving home for college is thrilling and stressful. Stress can hinder students' ability to leverage the resources needed to navigate this new chapter effectively. However, anxious students can reduce stress and build resilience and self-confidence by consciously learning and deploying stress management tools, using available school resources, and avoiding non-helpful self-sabotaging behavior. **Note: This article has been revised and edited**

from its original version, which was previously published [mention where it was published or the original date, if applicable]. The content has been updated for clarity and accuracy.



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