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GETTING REAL ABOUT COLLEGE LIFE

By *Annie Fox, M.Ed*

When you leave for college, you'll say goodbye to all you've ever known (at least until Thanksgiving break). Throughout your college career, you're going to face many challenges. It's normal and good to feel a certain level of stress when dealing with new situations—it keeps you alert, aware and on your toes. But when you're at college, especially during the first weeks and months, you'll want to be in control of stress, otherwise you can start feeling weighed down and overwhelmed.

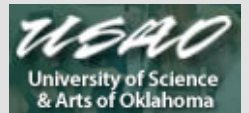
So how do you stay balanced as a college freshman? How do you enjoy your new independence, have fun and still manage to handle everything? Be realistic about your expectations for college-life. That's going to help you deal with your new reality so you'll feel at home a lot sooner. Here are some tips.

1. Roommates: Nobody's perfect – not even you. Hopefully you'll get an awesome roommate who perfectly matches your sleep and study habits. But in case you don't, you're going to have to be flexible. Flexibility, effective communication skills and the art of compromise are keys for success in life – If you don't already have these keys, time to start working on a set. Also, be realistic. Your freshman college roommate doesn't have to be your best friend. If the two of you can successfully negotiate who gets which bed and nail down some basic rules for loud music, privacy and mess levels, that's enough. If it turns out that you actually become friends, even better! NOTE: Some people just can't get along with each other no matter what. If it turns out that you and your roommate are at war, don't suffer in silence. It will only stress you out more. Instead, talk to your R.A.

THE COLLEGE SEARCH

1. Do your best in high school—the better your grades, SAT scores and extracurricular activities, the more college options you'll have.
2. Figure out what you're looking for because the clearer you are about what you want in a college's size, fields of study, sports, etc., the easier it will be to find it.
3. Visit schools—sit in on classes. Talk to students. Ask yourself, "Could I be happy here?" (Can't visit? Take a virtual tour online. Call Admissions for more info).
4. Apply—do your best on the application and get all the parts in on time.
5. Relax—if you want to go to college, you will get in somewhere.

Featured Schools



(resident advisor) about mediating a truce or swapping with someone else who also has roommate issues.

2. Workload: Procrastination is death. Maybe in high school you can write a paper the night before it's due and get an A, but try that in college and the professor will recognize it as something that was thrown together at the last minute. It's no fun working under pressure and it's no fun getting bad grades, so why go there? Want to avoid big time stress in college? Stay on top of your coursework. You'll need to because there's going to be a lot of it. Expect that. Expect also that your mom and dad won't be checking to see if your homework's done. Depending on your parents, that may be great news, but it also means that you're on your own now. If you haven't yet taken complete responsibility for your schoolwork, don't wait until college. Start creating smarter study habits now. That doesn't mean you need study all the time – that will definitely stress you out. Avoiding stress means staying balanced. Scheduling breaks is part of that. (see "Fun" below). Just make sure you balance those breaks with effective work sessions that keep you on top of the workload and not buried under it.

3. Friends: There are lots of new people to meet. Maybe you've had the same group of close friends since the beginning of high school or earlier. Maybe part of what you're worrying about when you think of college is "Will my friends change? Will we still be best friends?" Based on what usually happens, the answers are "yes" and "probably not." The day-to-day experience of being at college changes people. Even close friends who end up going to the same college often grow apart. That's even more likely if you and your friends are at different schools. Expect that and you'll be less surprised and stressed about it.

The flip side is that you can also expect to make new friends. All colleges have freshman orientation programs especially designed for freshman to get to know each other. Freshmen are very friendly. They have to be because everyone's in the same boat, and it's called "I need some new friends now!" So don't worry, you'll find people to bond with, especially if you've done a good job picking the right college (see sidebar).

4. Fun: It's good for you. In college everything is your choice – even the choices you make when you're looking for fun. Maybe you're worried about your ability to make good choices. Based on what you hear and what you see in movies, college students have a reputation for being wild and crazy at times. Maybe just thinking about the college social scene is stressing you out. If so, then take a few deep breaths and relax. By now you should be getting the sense that avoiding stress is all about balance. That includes balancing "fun" with the rest of college life. It will help a lot if you know what is good fun and what isn't. In this way, college isn't any different from high school. Illegal substances are still illegal. Underage drinking is still underage drinking. Breaking the rules still has consequences. Consequences lead to stress. Want to avoid stress? Make good choices. (Sound familiar?) Any offered "fun" that gives you an "uh, oh" feeling is something you need to think about.

Bottom line, college is filled with opportunities. If you make good choices, you'll feel good about who you are, gain the respect of others, have a great time, get a great education, and you'll grow up in the process. All of that's included in your college tuition. What a deal!

*Annie Fox, M.Ed. is an educator, author and online advisor. Her books include **The Teen Survival Guide to Dating and Relating and Too Stressed to Think?** Check out her Web site at www.anniefox.com.*