Handling Separation Anxiety

Students leaving home to attend college are likely concerned about their friendships. Questions may arise in their minds such as:

- “How will I ever find friends this good again?”
- “What if we can’t stay connected over the distance?”
- “Am I going to regret not staying home?”
- “What will I do without them?”

All of these feelings are completely natural, as big changes are happening. Some of these concerns may have to do with separation anxiety, which in adults is “characterized by an excessive fear of physical or emotional separation from close attachment figures or environments, usually the home” (Kirsten, Grenyer, Wagner & Manicavasagar, 2008).

“Part of the adjustment process for first-year students involves grieving the loss of precollege friendships as they have known,” according to Jennifer Crissman Ishler, DEd, an assistant professor of counselor education at Pennsylvania State University. “This loss and separation often trigger emotional distress resulting in adjustment difficulties.”

To help your student contend with the possibility of separation anxiety, you can:

- Encourage him not to spend all his time and energy at school trying to maintain ties with old friends. It’s important that he also gets out there and invests in new friendships.
- Discuss how she is feeling now, so all of the emotions don’t overwhelm her on move-in day or during the first month.
- Consider having him talk with a counselor now to be proactive.
- Let her know that there are counselors on campus and other helpful staff who are willing to discuss any issues with her.
Helping Younger Siblings Deal with the Transition

With so much focus on your college student, it can be easy to forget about the impact that her leaving can have on younger siblings. Sibling relationships can be enduring, and a sense of loss can be felt in a number of ways when an older sibling heads off to college.

Take Time to Talk with Younger Siblings. Ask them how they are feeling about the upcoming transition and explain some of the ways things might change at home. Consider discussing...

› How family dynamics may change
› How resources such as transportation and bedroom space may need to be reallocated appropriately among those still at home
› How the cost of sending a student to college may change your family’s financial situation

Be Careful Not to Send a Guilt Trip. Consider...

› Allowing connections among older and younger siblings to happen naturally, rather than forcing them to spend time together.
› Not making your college student feel guilty about wanting to spend time with friends before leaving home. Bringing some closure to this aspect of his life is really important too.

Involving Younger Siblings in Planning for Your College Student’s Departure. Consider asking younger siblings to…

› Help pick out items for a residence hall room
› Plan a family going-away event to send your student off with love
› Put important college dates on their calendar, such as family weekend, homecoming and more
› Come with the family to any campus visits that are taken

You know your family best, so you’ll determine the best ways to involve everyone in the upcoming transition. Working together will build lasting memories while also making the process go more smoothly.

Staying Connected with the College Sibling

There are a variety of ways that parents can help those children still at home stay connected with an older sibling at college.

Plan Family Gatherings

› Plan a family dinner out when the student comes home to visit.
› Explore a new city by meeting halfway between home and college.
› Have the younger sibling(s) and college sibling(s) collaboratively plan a family weekend getaway.

Make Virtual Connections

› Plan weekly phone calls for younger siblings to talk with their older sibling.
› Provide access to Skype and/or Facetime for siblings back home.
› Help a sibling prepare a college care package.

Plan a Campus Visit

› Family Weekend  •  Homecoming
› Sibling Weekend  •  Athletic events

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Crissman Ishler said this phenomenon often tends to hit females harder than males.

First year programs and events give students some built-in ways to make the transition easier. There are also many peer helpers – from staff in the residence halls to those at orientation – who are genuinely interested in helping your student. Encourage her to seek out these resources so she can focus less on the perceived friendship losses and more on what’s out there to gain!

Sources: “The Prevalence of Separation Anxiety in Undergraduate Students,” Boise State University Undergraduate Research and Scholarship Conference, April 12, 2010; “Separation Anxiety in College Freshmen,” WebMD Health News, August 12, 2003

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Making a Fresh Start

Fresh starts. They’re quite appealing. That’s why so many people make New Year’s resolutions!

The beginning of a new academic year offers the collegiate version of New Year’s Eve – with a fresh start available to everyone. Whether your student will be new to campus or is returning for another year, it’s time to think about what he or she is looking for in that new start.

A Recipe for Success

Rather than just wishing for a good new start, though, there are some ways your student can set herself up for success. For instance…

- If she’s hoping to do well academically, she can spend time now reading, reviewing notes, doing crossword puzzles, writing and other tasks that limber up her mind for the school year ahead.
- If he’s hoping to make good friends, he can look at the campus website now to see what activities he might get involved with to meet like-minded people.
- If she’s hoping to get serious about her career search, she can job shadow someone in a field of interest, contact career services now for some pointers and get a resume draft together so it’s ready for critique.
- If he’s hoping to give back to the community, he can do some volunteering during the rest of the summer months, while contacting the community services office on campus now to see what options will be available in the fall.

Fresh starts often take preparation, so encourage your student to get going now to be ready to tackle the start of the school year with gusto!

A Sense of Belonging

Belonging is a potent force in most people’s lives and college students are no exception. When they come to campus, they’re looking for a place where they can fit and matter.

Encourage your student to talk with orientation leaders, residence hall staff and other student leaders about how they found a sense of belonging on campus. Hearing peers’ stories is one of the best ways for students to envision how they can belong among the campus community, too.

There are so many examples of ways students can find campus nooks that fit them and their personality. They include…

- Community service projects
- Intramural sports
- Campus employment
- The commuter council
- Residence hall government
- Campus clubs
- Giving tours for Admissions
- Theater and music groups
- Student media
- The learning center
- Research with professors
- Multicultural organizations
- Attending campus events

Finding purpose is a key piece of belonging. When students engage in purposeful activities with other people, that sense of belonging tends to naturally kick in.

It’s going to take effort on your student’s part, without a doubt. Encourage him to reach out and try new things. Or she can talk with a student leader about her interests and where they might fit on campus. Promoting a sense of belonging often starts with these simple conversations where students can see the possibilities – and see themselves in the midst of them!

Setting Short-Term Goals

A fresh start often involves some goal-setting. Here’s a simple example…

Goal: To get comfortable with people living on my residence hall floor.

Action Steps:
1. Accept invitations from student staffers to attend meals, events and more.
2. Say hello and make eye contact when passing people in the hall.
3. Keep my door open when I’m in there doing things that don’t require full concentration (i.e., sorting laundry, checking Facebook, etc.).
4. Get involved in programs, hall council, floor meetings and more to meet and interact with people in the community.
Encouraging Positive Self-Esteem

Self-esteem is a belief in one’s self, or self-respect. And, according to many experts, it is something that often eludes many college students. For one reason or another, many young people suffer from a lack of self-esteem, which can affect how they adjust to college life and function as students.

What are some signs of healthy self-esteem?

People who have a healthy sense of self-esteem, generally speaking, will feel competent in their ability to cope with life’s ever-changing situations. They trust their judgment and know when to get help when a particular challenge arises. They feel capable of making sound, responsible choices and can handle change when it occurs.

But healthy self-esteem is not egotism. It is never a feeling of superiority over others. In fact, if a person seems to need to remind others of his talents or skills, it could be a symptom of someone who is trying to compensate for a lack of self-esteem.

What can you expect this year?

At the college level, issues of self-confidence and competence can surface as students try to adjust to an unfamiliar setting and challenging academic expectations. The good student might have to work harder to maintain the same grade point average, while the mediocre student might have concerns about being good enough to make it. Being away from home can also contribute to an unsettled feeling. An otherwise self-confident young adult might show signs of insecurity and emotional withdrawal for the first time in his life.

Students are adjusting to a new social scene as well. Their relationships with friends from home are changing even as new relationships are developing. It takes time for students to find their voice and identity within a different setting.

What helps?

These dips in self-esteem are normal when people face new challenges.

As students continue their academic and social pursuits, and begin to enjoy some degree of success, their self-esteem levels often start to rise again.

Things will likely get better if they…

Build on pre-existing strengths. All students have competencies in various areas and often just need to be reminded of them, especially as they’re being challenged right and left by new things on campus. By helping them focus on their strengths rather than weaknesses, they can grow in self-esteem and self-confidence.

Avoid comparisons. If your student is struggling with self-esteem and begins to look around at others who have greater skills and achievements, he may back himself into a dangerous corner. It’s your student’s responsibility only to try his best. From that effort alone he can find personal satisfaction and a healthy sense of pride. Remind your student that he doesn’t have to be the best at something in order to be a valuable asset to the campus community.

Try new things. Your student can never know about a hidden talent or personal strength if he never tries new things. Now is the time for healthy experimentation, whether it involves a different academic area, a new responsibility, a new interest or hobby, or even a new group of friends. Your student – and you – might be surprised to find what interests or talents are just waiting to be discovered!

We’re Here to Help

If your student struggles with self-esteem issues, assure him that he is not alone! There are counselors and other staff members on campus who have chosen to work with college students and who know their issues. Your student can call now to see what services are available so he is plugged into a support network right at the beginning of school.

More than anything, make sure your student knows that it’s a real sign of strength to ask for help. We encourage that mightily and look forward to helping your student get on the road to healthier self-esteem.