Success Over Stress
Unique Stressors of College

Slide 1: Objectives

By the end of this lesson you will be able to:
• Identify the unique stressors of college life
• Appraise the complexities of this time in your life
• Recognize that each person’s experience is very individualized

You’ve probably already realized that being in college involves many new and unique experiences. Some of these are anticipated and expected, while others will surprise you. In this lesson, we’ll explore some of the potential stressors unique to college students.

Slide 2: Away from Family

Everyone has a different experience with their parents when they go to college. Some get homesick, while others can’t get away fast enough. All parents have expectations for their children, and some make it a point of communicating them. In the past decade the term “helicopter parents” debuted on the scene. These parents earn this name because they are constantly hovering over their children. They may try to make all of the decisions for their children and find it difficult to let them develop into independent adults. Some try to remove all obstacles from their child’s life and may even do homework for them. How do you manage a parent like this when you go to college? Constant phone calls and visits may prove stressful to your relationship in this time of growth and development in your life. It’s a hard task to make them proud and please them, while at the same time pleasing yourself and reaching your own goals. When your parents are consistently doing everything for you, you miss opportunities to learn how to take care of yourself. Creating boundaries between your parents and yourself can be a healthy step in gaining your independence. It may take time and adjustment on both of your parts to get used to this change in your relationship. Communication is a vital part of this process.

Being on your own at college can bring about both fun and challenging situations. Some students are used to talking to a family member about the ups and downs of life. Distance from home can make this more difficult. You may have to forgo regular face-to-face conversations and substitute them with phone calls, video chatting, social networking, or other technologies.
Sometimes this distance can mean a decrease in communication with your family, and other times, an increase. Everyone handles these situations in different ways.

**Slide 3: Challenges of Freedom**

Previously, your family may have dictated your schedule. Eating meals, watching television, doing homework, and participating in other activities may have been done on a more rigid timeline. In college, you have more freedom on when you decide to do these tasks. Managing these new tasks and keeping your priorities in focus can be challenging.

When you’re in college, there is no one to tell you what to do and where to be at certain times. You make your own decisions. You have the choice to go to classes or stay in your room and sleep. You are responsible for getting your work done. Unlike high school, most students don’t have eight hours a day of classes. You may only have a couple of classes a day, so it may seem like you have a lot of spare time on your hands. With this increased time comes increased responsibility. How will you manage your time? It’s all about figuring out your priorities. Will you stay in and study, veg out on the couch, or go out to party? You may have to do a lot of juggling, which can be overwhelming.

College students in particular need to take time to figure out schedules, as there are many different activities to do all in one day. In fact, you will likely have to readjust every semester as your course times change. Many students have jobs or belong to student groups, in addition to their academic commitments. That free time you once had, could fill up very quickly.

**Slide 4: Focus on School**

It’s important to remember that your primary reason for attending college is to focus on school and get a degree. Although the college experience is a very special time in your life with many opportunities for fun, growth, and development, you should keep in mind the real reasons you are here. It’s easy to get distracted by all of the things you can do in your time here, so it can be helpful to remind yourself of your academic and career goals.

Your time at college should be focused around doing well at school. You may feel pressure to succeed. Grades, expectations, deadlines, level of academic preparedness, and test anxiety can all impact the amount of pressure you experience.

**Slide 5: Grades**

How do you perceive grades? Some students are happy just to pass, while others are highly disappointed if they don’t earn an A. Some students have trouble adjusting to a change in grading structure from high school. The
amount of effort required to get an A in high school can be very different than in college. There can be a lot of variability in grades from course to course. It may be frustrating to put in the same amount of effort into two courses and earn different grades.

**Slide 6: Expectations**

In addition to your own expectations for your grades are the expectations from your family. If your parents have high expectations, are you worried about the possibility of disappointing them? Some families are not as concerned and would rather let you figure it out on your own. This can be a relief – or it can be distressing. How you deal with these expectations can contribute to academic pressure and stress.

**Slide 7: Deadlines**

Unlike high school, you won’t get reminders from your professors to turn in your assignments on time, and you won’t get a letter or report card sent home to your parents. It is your responsibility to get your work done. You have to learn to manage multiple deadlines and when to contact your professors when you have questions or concerns.

**Slide 8: Academic Preparedness**

The academic rigor of college can be much more intense than high school. Many students find themselves unequipped with the tools needed to succeed academically. Writing research papers, studying, and comprehending complex materials are a few areas that students may struggle with. A lot of schools offer resources to help you develop these skills. Look for writing centers, workshops on how to utilize the library, or other campus trainings that address these areas. It is also a good idea to speak with your advisor if you need help navigating campus resources or support.

Resource Links:
- [Division of Undergraduate Education](#)
- [Learning and Academic Resource Center (LARC)](#)
- [Center for Excellence in Writing and Communication](#)

**Slide 9: Test Anxiety**

Some courses assign a higher percentage of your grade based on midterms and finals. Just one test may have a big impact on your final grade. Time limits, feeling unprepared, focusing on the consequences, and thinking that everyone else knows the answers except you can contribute to test anxiety.
in some students. A meeting with your campus counseling center can help you locate resources to deal with this anxiety.

**Slide 10: Finding Your Identity**

The process of identity formation continues through the young adult years (Erikson, 1950). Who are you? Beyond academic pressure, figuring out who you are while in college can be exciting and stressful at the same time. You will encounter many people who may be very different from you in terms of culture, religion, sexuality, ability, and political ideologies. At the same time, you may be figuring these things out for yourself! You are forming your values and beliefs that you will continue to carry throughout your life.

For many students, college gives them the freedom to figure out and be who they truly are or want to be. However, for people who feel they need to hide who they are or feel ashamed of who they are, it can be very isolating. There are many campus resources, counseling services, and student groups that provide a safe space for you to share these feelings of isolation and explore and become confident in who you are.

Many campuses provide you with the resources to explore what interests you, whether that is campus government, a student group, or perhaps a sport. You are encouraged to express yourself and discuss your opinions.

**Resource Links:**
- [LGBT Support Services](#)
- [Disabilities Services](#)
- [Cross Cultural Center](#)

**Slide 11: College Social Life**

Beyond academic pressure, the social aspect of college can be exciting and stressful at the same time.

College is also a time to meet new people and establish friendships that can last throughout your lifetime. However, not everyone is comfortable just approaching a stranger and striking up a conversation. So, where do you meet people? First, look to the place where you live. Meeting your neighbors is a great start, whether you live in a residence hall, apartment, or house. Student groups are another option to connect with people who share similar interests as you. Tag along with a friend when he or she is hanging out with people who are outside your circle of peers. Another option is joining an intramural sport. Participating in these groups can make you feel more connected to your campus and can help you develop friendships with fellow students.

What about your friends from home? If you go to different schools or if your friends stayed at home, the separation can test the strength of your

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friendship. You may need to make an extra effort to keep these people in your life. Sometimes, people go their separate ways during college and possibly reconnect with old friends again later in life. The new friends that you make can provide a lot of social support.

**Slide 12: Roommates**

For those of you living away from home for the first time, living with a roommate can be an amazing experience, or a not so great one. Will you live with a friend, or find someone new? Are you comfortable living with someone of a different gender? Is she a night owl or early riser? Does he keep things clean or live like a slob? These are all things to consider when selecting a roommate, that is, if you have a choice in the matter. Many students are also surprised to learn that just because someone is your friend doesn’t mean that they will be a good roommate. Everyone has different personalities and communication styles, so establishing rules or guidelines for your space can be a good first step in preventing conflict down the road.

**Slide 13: Relationships**

Being in an intimate relationship during college can bring great joy, but can also bring stress. It’s nice to have a companion to spend time with and to comfort you when you have a tough day. Long distance relationships can also bring a great deal of joy, but can be tough when you don’t have that person around all of the time; using different forms of technology, like video chatting and texting, can help keep you connected, even when you’re very far apart. Regardless of whether or not your significant other is close by or far away, new or long term, balancing time spent on the relationship with other priorities can be challenging but necessary. The following tips might come in handy . . . .

- Don’t ever feel that you have to date others in college. We’ve certainly met a few people who have become disappointed if they haven’t met their “soul mates” by senior year. Many people do meet their significant others in college, but just as many people don’t. Life will unfold as it should and you shouldn’t feel desperate to find a partner. Being content with yourself is a much more important task.
- If you do go on dates, always try to learn as much as you can about the other person. If you go out with someone new, make sure you’ll be in a public place and also be sure to tell a friend what time you’re leaving, where you’re going, and when you expect to be back. Taking these steps isn’t a sign of paranoia; it’s just smart.
- If someone in whom you simply have no interest asks you out, or if you feel the need to stop dating someone, talk with him or her honestly, assertively, -and nicely! The conversation may be difficult, but both of you will be better off in the end.
Slide 14: **Sex**

College is a time where many of you are surrounded by people your age and may still be developing your values and beliefs related to sexual activity. Though many people think that everyone at college is having sex, not everyone is doing it. According to the *2010 College Student Health Survey* (Lust, Ehlinger, & Golden, 2010), most Minnesota college students —77%—report having zero or one sexual partners in the previous 12 months while 27% of Minnesota college students were abstinent in that same time period.

Depending on your previous sexual education, or lack thereof, you may have a different level of knowledge on these topics compared to your peers. Finding reliable, accurate, and unbiased sources of sexual health education can be challenging. Look to your student health center for resources. They can also help you find condoms, contraceptives, and sexually transmitted infection testing and treatment services. If you don’t have a student health center, locate a local non-profit sexual health clinic or health department.

Slide 15: **Communication and Sex**

Communicating with your partner about safer sex is essential, be that in a committed relationship or a casual hook-up. For partners not well acquainted, this could be an awkward topic to discuss. You may think to use protection in a casual encounter but it is equally important to use a barrier method, such as a condom or dental dam in a long-term relationship. Talking to your partner about your expectations regarding safer sex can prevent dealing with unintended outcomes and conflict down the road.

While sexual relationships can bring pleasure, they can also bring a lot of stress. Casual sexual encounters can bring the stress of uncertainty, insecurity, pregnancy, and STI scares or realities. Committed, monogamous relationships can bring some of these same stressors and can test relationships in other ways, as well. It’s always important to remain mindful of your values and beliefs, particularly when consuming alcohol.

Slide 16: **How To Talk About Sex**

To discuss the topic of sex with your partner, it might be a good idea to consider the following questions:

- Where will this conversation take place?
- When would be a good time to have this conversation?
- How will you bring up your concern?
- What will you say?
When the conversation takes place, effectively communicating your needs or concerns is most important. Remember to:

- Focus on statements like, “I feel….” Or “I believe…”
- Focus on the behavior rather than on the person. People can change their behaviors but not necessarily who they are.
- Make observations not judgments
- Share ideas or offer alternatives rather than giving advice.
- Frame feedback in a way that emphasizes the value for the recipient.

Most importantly, remember that no one deserves to be made to feel hurt, sad, or unloved - you or your partner!

Resource Links:
- Campus Assault Resources and Education (CARE)
- Sexual Violence at UCI

Slide 17: Alcohol and College Life

Many students come to campus thinking that college is all about drinking and parties. While alcohol use is prevalent in college, it’s not the focus of most students. Most of your peers don’t drink as much as you think they do. When college students in Minnesota were asked to estimate how many of their peers engaged in high-risk drinking, on average they overestimated the actual percentage (Lust, Ehlinger, & Golden, 2010). Sometimes it seems as if parties and alcohol are everywhere and it can be tempting to go overboard. As with other aspects of college life, you need to find a balance between your social life and academics. College is an opportunity to learn how to be a responsible drinker, how to have a good time, and how to keep you and your friends safe.

Slide 18: VIDEO: When It’s Too Much

When do you know too much is too much?

If I don’t have any free time, then like, no time to just calm down, to relax? Like, that’s when I know it’s too much.

I’ll just keep going until I breakdown, really.

When you can’t perform anymore. The stress just becomes too much and you can’t think straight, you can’t stay organized. And so, like, that kind of happened to me last year and I ended up moving back home.
I feel like it's too much. I feel like I want to give up.

Not being able to sleep at night, when your mind is constantly going. What do I have to do? What do I have to do? Um, constantly looking ahead. Maybe even a sense of fear. Uh, might be, might be a sign that you're, that you're really pushing yourself too hard.

**Slide 19: Finding Balance**

Sometimes it seems like the most stressful part of college is figuring out how to balance all of the demands in your life. When there are only 24 hours in a day, fitting in school, friends, a social life, sleep, eating, physical activity, and possibly a job can feel like a daunting task. How will you make time for all of your priorities? Strategies that some students have found successful are setting aside blocks of time for different tasks, rewarding yourself for getting homework done, and keeping a planner. Don’t forget to plan time for family, friends and fun too.

**Slide 20: Technology**

Advances in technology have made our lives more convenient in some respects, but technology can also make some aspects of life more complicated. Gone are the days of writing papers on typewriters and going to the library to search out the hard copies of journal articles. Now we can download journal articles and take classes online in the comfort of our homes. More can be done from the click of your mouse than ever before. This transition can bring new challenges. Learning how to access online research tools and how to identify reliable resources may be required for many of your courses and can take some time to figure out.

Resource Link: [UCI Research Tools](#)

**Slide 21: Social Media**

It’s easy to get distracted from your priorities when you are constantly being bombarded by phone calls, texts, emails, and social media websites. The rise in the use of social media can also have a downside. People freely share their personal information and pictures without thinking about all the ways it can land them in hot water if not done carefully. Posting a photo of your underage drinking escapade or texting a racy picture to your sweetheart can lead to some unintended consequences. Once you post or text something, it will never really be private again.
Technology requires boundaries. To protect yourself from information overload and chronic technology distractions, it’s a good idea to unplug at times. Don’t worry—all of your Facebook friends, texts, messages, stories, games, YouTube videos, and everything else will be waiting for you when you plug back in!

Keep in mind that just because life seems to be racing by, you don’t have to always jump in and run along. It’s OK to choose a slower pace – whether it is for an hour, a day, a month, a semester or a year. Remember, let your life – and the pace of it – flow from what’s really important to you: your values and priorities.

Slide 22: Transportation

Depending on your campus, getting around can seem like a headache. Whether it’s a big city or a small town, figuring out your transportation needs ahead of time can save you a lot of stress down the road. Consider how you will get groceries, go to events, and see your family and friends. Will you have a car, or will you rely on walking, biking, carpooling, or mass transit? How much does each of the options cost and what time is involved? Car insurance, gas, and bus passes add up, so be sure to budget these expenses.

Slide 23: Commuting

Being a commuter student poses unique challenges and stresses. You need to make more of an effort to make connections on campus and get the “college experience.” It can be hard to feel independent if you are living at home with your family. You may not have the private space that you might if you lived on your own. The cost and time involved in commuting can be stressful, especially if you run into traffic and have not planned for the extra time. You may end up spending the entire day on campus if your classes are spread out. You’ll also have to think about meals and if you want to bring your lunch or buy food on campus. Planning your schedule may be even more important to ensure that you make the most of your time.

Slide 24: Accessing Food

You may not consider it at first, but changes in food and exercise are a part of the college transition. Depending on your living situation, you may be more limited with your food choices. If you live in a residence hall, you’ll probably rely on the dining hall or eating out. If you live in an apartment or house with a kitchen, you’ll be able to prepare more of your own meals. Learning some healthy and quick recipes can help you save time and ensure that you get essential nutrients. Other things to consider include time spent
packing lunches and snacks, cost of food, and learning how to cook with the resources you have.

**Slide 25: Exercise**

Working out can be an entirely different situation based on the resources at your college. If you played sports in high school look for intramural teams to join. Will you have access to a recreation center? Some people hate the gym and would rather work out to an exercise DVD or run outside. Walking or biking to classes are other ways to keep moving. It’s all about figuring out how to have fun and stay active while working with the resources you have. Remember to budget time for your workout so you’re less likely to skip it when you’re tired and stressed. Some people workout with friends or switch up activities to keep it exciting. Remember, exercise is a method of stress relief; it can give you more energy, and keep you focused.

**Resource Link:**
- Anteater Recreation Center (ARC)
- UCI Campus Recreation Intramural Sports

**Slide 26: Health**

Managing your healthcare is one of those things that is now an essential part of your life. Will you be insured through your parents, buy a plan through your college, or look to the government? Many colleges require that all students verify proof of insurance before they are able to register for classes. While not having health insurance seems like a great way to save money, especially if you’re healthy, you can’t predict when an emergency will hit. Not being insured and racking up medical bills is a quick way to get into a pile of debt. Not only that but letting your medical coverage lapse can make it more difficult to obtain health insurance later. It’s best to avoid these headaches if you can.

Students who are still on their parents’ insurance often have concerns about privacy. For example, will your parent get a statement about that STI testing you received last month? Consult with your insurance company to see how they handle confidentiality issues.

Where do you go to get medical treatment? Many colleges have a student health center right on campus. Sometimes there is a university hospital as well. County governments have health departments and may provide a discounted rate on some services. Also, there may be a non-profit clinic that offers services on a sliding-fee scale. Get in touch with the student health center or local health department to locate medical resources.

**Resource Link:**
Slide 27: Figuring Out Basic Needs

Sometimes it isn’t until you have the flu when you realize that maybe you weren’t as prepared to leave the nest as you thought you were. You end up calling home to ask what you should do to treat an illness. Or it might be how to cook a family recipe or how to do your laundry. Sometimes we take for granted all of the things our family helped us with and what we never learned. It may take a couple of phone calls home to figure out those basic life skills like first aid, meal preparation, laundry, and cleaning.

Slide 28: Finances

A part of the increased freedom and responsibility of being in college is the financial aspect that comes with it. Not only do you have the responsibility of figuring out how to pay for college, but you’re likely to be face with tempting offers of excessive student loans, multiple credit cards, and you may even rack up debt. Clothing, groceries, eating out, bills, rent, and student loans all add up fast and it can be hard to focus on school when you are constantly concerned with money. Are you a spender or a saver? Do you know how to budget your finances? Will you get a job, look to your family for help, take out loans, or a combination of these strategies? Think about whether you live within your means and if those means are consistent with your values and priorities. Taking out extra student loans now to pay for clothes, gaming stations, and vacations may seem like a good idea, but remember, living like a student while you’re in school, means you’re less likely to have to live like a student down the road.

Slide 29: Where Do You Want To Go?

Part of figuring out who you are, is answering the question, what are your future goals? Will you look for a job right away, go to graduate school, travel abroad, or volunteer? Many students don’t even declare a major until midway through school, and then some go on to change their major multiple times. You might find that a certain area interests you more than the one you originally planned to study. Challenging issues that might come up include figuring out what you want to do with your life and considering if your major will help you get there. Will you be able to support yourself financially with the path you’ve chosen and will you be happy doing it? These questions are common during college.

Slide 30: VIDEO: Initial Stressors

What kind of stress did you first experience when you started college?
From high school, where I really didn’t have to put much effort into schooling, to coming here where I have to do several hours of homework every night, big transition.

It was hard, it was stressful, moving away from my family and having to deal with, like, everything on my own.

There really was a bigger workload then I had expected.

Hit the ground running, took twenty credits the first semester and uh, realized never to do that again.

Uh, I think there’s a lot of types of stress. Um, a lot of ‘em include, like, fitting in to, like, the college life.

Just the social aspect. It's so different. Like, I'm living with a stranger. I have, you know, a new roommate.

Just balancing everything out. Balancing school, balancing uh work, and also balancing a social life. It gets kind of uh stressful.

I knew it was a lot of stress. I mean, I'm here, trying to do thirteen credits. Taking a lot of classes. Didn't know that there's going to be so many, like, papers I have to write every single day.

Time management, compared to high school, has been a big shift for me. You know, I was able to get everything done, do everything that I wanted to do. Uh, whereas here at college, you know, it's, it's very difficult to manage all my time and be able to have a social life and get the sleep at the same time.

I was a transfer student, so I really didn't know anything. I didn't know any classes, I didn't know anyone.

Your eating patterns change, your sleep patterns change, your homework amounts change, the professors definitely aren't as close to you as your teachers once were in high school. So you kind of have to fight for attention and fight for help and stuff like that. So, a lot, everything's gotten changed.

Slide 31: Moving Forward

In this lesson, we’ve introduced just a few of the common sources of stress for college students. You no doubt can think of more issues to add to the list! In
the next few lessons, we'll explore these concepts in more detail and provide you with some ideas for addressing any stress you encounter.

References


The Rothenberger Institute provides a suite of wellness-based courses focusing on the knowledge and skills students need to lead healthy, productive, and balanced lives. For more information visit [www.ri.umn.edu](http://www.ri.umn.edu)