

A Family Perspective on Responding to Predictable Changes in College Students

by Tom J. Brian

Typical Changes in Students

The process of college education often precipitates transitions in many areas of life, both for the student and for those close to the student. These transitions typically include challenges in developing skills in the functions of:

- work (developing self-efficacy and competence toward a meaningful career)
- love (communicating and negotiating in all relationships)
- play ("blowing off steam," and increasing resilience);

and in the processes of:

- thinking (improving concentration, anticipation, problem solving)
- feeling (becoming more "user-friendly" with emotions)
- behaving (managing habits, enhancing performance).

Changes in all of these areas are typically more intense and erratic when one is in college. While sometimes distressing, these changes are usually best thought of as experimenting with ways to cope with the "terrible opportunities" of the transition. When appropriately, managed, this coping process results in higher, more complex and adaptive levels of functioning (a general benefit of successful college education).

Suggestions for Families

Family and friends are usually affected (and even changed) by changes in college students. Family members also go through learning cycles (such as "over" and "under" involvement) as part of the process of finding an optimal balance. Simply learning to recognize and anticipate patterns, understanding the patterns as part of an adaptive process, and reflecting on this with oneself and others can be very useful. At times, however, the patterns of change go beyond adaptive limits or become "stuck."

Common signs for concern include frequent, prolonged, or intense occurrences of

- disruptions in eating or sleeping habits
- excessive use of alcohol or other drugs
- distractibility or poor concentration
- stress, anxiety, panic, sadness, depression, or despair

- inhibited performance, inactivity; or hyperactivity
- difficulty making decisions
- thoughts of harm to self or others
- interpersonal dissatisfaction or conflict
- difficulty engaging in pleasant activities

While these signs deserve attention, they are usually best thought of as symptoms of a natural life transition. Nonetheless, symptoms can cause harm and need to be addressed. Students most often benefit from learning more proficient skills in life health areas such as:

- life planning (managing time and activities, goal setting, overcoming procrastination)
- health behavior (nutrition, exercise, sleep, habits and addictions)
- social fulfillment (communication, negotiation, conflict management, long-term intimacy)
- work satisfaction (performance enhancement, competency clarification, frustration reduction)
- emotion management (enhancing positive feelings, moderating negative ones)
- cognitive development (improving thought processes, reducing self-defeating thoughts)

Usually a student's first line of attempts at coping with distress is informal and personal, often involving family or friends. However, when problems are especially intense or persistent or when family or friends are feeling overwhelmed, it is advisable for any or all persons to consider professional consultation. In doing so, it is important to remember that psychological consultation is an interactive process. Clientele have the right to understand the rationale and evidence for the safety and effectiveness of any suggestions offered, and to emphasize focus on signs of improvement.

Properly managed, major life transitions associated with college can result in higher levels of functioning for the student as well as the family. The ultimate result should be more meaningful lives for everyone. All strategies and resources used are best aimed toward this end.

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Editor's Note: Dr. Brian is a licensed health service psychologist, adjunct professor of psychology, and director of the Counseling and Psychological Services Center. University students and members of their immediate families are eligible for services, which are free of charge and strictly confidential. Contact can be made by calling 631-2200.