

Transition from high school to college can be filled with stressors, says UH psychiatrist

By AARON HOWARD

Beware the ides of March – and November. For college students, those are the two most stressful times on campus. It's the home stretch of the spring and autumn semesters, and it is when some students must come to terms that things are not working out.

In a report from the American College Health Association, researchers found that one out of two students go through periods of being unable to function. One out of two students report regular episodes of binge drinking and related problems, like sexual assault and car accidents. And, one out of 10 seriously considered suicide.

While some psychiatric research finds college students these days experience more mental illness than in the past, other studies contradict these findings and suggest that more college students are coming to campus with pre-existing mental illness.

Why would anybody be unhappy in college? Wouldn't everybody want to go back to those idealistic days?

No. You're not fitting in. You're flunking the courses you need. You've discovered you have a drinking problem. You can't seem to get out of bed in the morning. And, how are you going to face your parents? These college situations always have been a problem. But now, there's more publicity around mental health issues. The good news is that students are more willing to get help, said Kenneth Arfa, M.D., senior psychiatrist, University of Houston Health Center. Arfa and the other UH psychiatric physicians see students for evaluation, medication and referrals.

"The biggest issues I see among college students are anxiety and depression, followed by sleep disorders, ADHD, alcohol abuse, and eating disorders," said Arfa. "Bipolar disorder and schizophrenia also show up at this age, but fortunately are less common."

In his 11 years of working almost exclusively with young adults, Arfa confirmed that college and graduate students are more likely to seek help than when he started in practice. University students continue to have traditional stressors such as academic and social pressures.

Then, there are the more recent financial stressors due to the bad economy, rising college costs, and uncertainty about finding employment after college. Bad choices involving substance abuse and sex make things worse, said Arfa.

"For incoming freshmen, issues include moving from being dependent on parents to being independent and creating a new life model. Sometimes, that model clashes with the way one was raised, so it could be a clash of values or a direct clash with what their parents think they should be doing. Incoming students are often going through a period of identity changing, from being a high school star to just one of 40,000 students at college – and a freshman, to boot. During your first year, you also may discover your chosen career or major is boring or not what you want. Your parents disagree with you, or you're not sure what you want to do."

When students first begin college, issues that cause the most stress are breaking away from parents, roommates, figuring out how to manage alcohol, responding to sexual and peer pressure and new relationships with parents. Since this is all new territory, you don't stick a label on these stress-related issues, said Arfa. These adjustment issues result in anxiety or depression or substance abuse in only in a small number of the student population. If a student experiences a problem with being socially isolated, that can be really damaging, continued Arfa.

"Sexual and peer pressures for some people present problems. If one says no to sex, that may mean they won't have social connections or intimacy. If one agrees to sex they are not ready for – because, otherwise, they feel they won't have a relationship – that may, also, lead to problems. Students often think all their friends are more sexually active than actually is true, and if they don't get with the program – peer pressure – they will be left out. Peer pressure can be intense, but it is sometimes what you create in your own mind.



Kenneth Arfa

"Sex mixed with alcohol, for the women, can lead to date rapes. If a woman is too ashamed to speak about it, they could fall into depression and more drinking. For the men, alcohol could lead to failure-to-perform issues, which result in shame and fear. I get a lot of requests from college students for Viagra and Cialis as an insurance policy, or because they've had problems and are reluctant to look at other solutions."

As a student nears graduation, looming debt and the job market might become issues that cause anxiety and depression, added Arfa.

The majority of the students who seek psychiatric services at UH Student Health are self-referrals. Other students come referred by non-university doctors, through outreach, via teachers and the counselors in the dorms (the resident assistants), other students, and parents.

Parents of freshmen students should be aware what the potential for problems are, cautioned Arfa. "College is a wonderful time for reaching potential, making choices, building an identity, and learning about relationships. There's so much

good. But, it's also a time when serious depression, anxiety and substance abuse hit."

What can parents do?

Parents can be aware, listen and talk without judging, said Arfa. Watch for warning signs. Know what's available on campus in terms of counseling, wellness and psychiatric services.

Symptoms of depression include being sad or irritable most of the day, excessive fatigue and sleep, declining grades, and diminished grooming or cleanliness. Symptoms of anxiety include preoccupation with worries, physical signs like alcohol or drug use, being reluctant to talk about what they're doing with their time, severe moodiness, trouble with authority. Symptoms of suicide include talking about suicide, giving away one's possessions, social withdrawal, attempts at suicide.

"Even before problems arise, both parents and young adults need to find new ways to communicate. College students are not kids anymore. Parents need to learn to communicate at new levels, to talk about important issues without judging. Keep regular communication going. For example, set up a regular time before Shabbat every week to phone or Skype. Let your child know if they have problems, that they do not need to protect the parent from these problems. Parents don't need to agree with their kids about everything but at least agree to disagree." □

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