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Thriving in Today's Times: College Bound and Stressed Out?

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John is so ready to get back to college. It has been a grueling year and he just wants to relax with his friends. The economy is poor and things have been tense around the house. His parents seem to be constantly worried about money, and when they are tense the whole family is tense. He doesn't like that. He just wants to be comfortable in his own home. He looks forward to getting back into a routine, hanging out with his friends, and letting loose a little. He is sick of worrying. But as he begins to pack, guilt comes over him. He knows his family needs help and he knows his parents worry about him when he is gone. However, he also knows that a good education will help them all in the long run.

John is a typical college student. Most college students enjoy college life. They like to learn, be with friends, and have the sense of freedom that college life awards them. However, starting college for the first time or even returning to college can cause some stress. Stressors may include guilt for leaving home and a certain amount of homesickness.

In John's case, his guilt is wrenching because he realizes that his parents are under a great amount of stress due to forces beyond their control. He also realizes that he can't help his family if he is away from home. He knows his parents want him at college, but it doesn't lessen the guilt for not being there when his family needs him. To help alleviate feelings of guilt and perhaps even anger in your college-bound student, take the following steps:

- The whole family—parents and all children—needs to discuss the importance of the student's education. The student needs to feel supported in his decision to go to college. Honest, open communication will be especially important for families in crisis. Families

that can discuss any topic openly and calmly and can cope well during a time of crisis are able to communicate commitment and love for each other.

- The family needs to show the student that things will be under control while he or she is gone and that the work will get done without adding too much extra pressure on the rest of the family. This is called *role flexibility*. Families that have role flexibility can often cope with hardships better than families that do not have role flexibility.
- It is important to discuss any foreseeable problems that may lie ahead. For example, if John's parents are worried about paying for tuition, their concerns should be brought up now. This allows John time to talk to the university about financial aid or helps him prepare to get a part-time job at college. By accepting upcoming challenges, everyone can focus their energy on problem solving instead of on anger or denial. Accepting upcoming challenges also helps the student have some control both over his or her education and in helping the family. It is important for your son or daughter to be able to help. This is the time in their lives that they are striving for adulthood and independence—and helping the family can help them do so.

Another form of stress a college student may feel is homesickness or loneliness, especially if there is guilt for leaving and going to school during hard times. Here are some ways that John's parents and you can help your college-bound students:

- Acknowledge the homesickness or loneliness. Help them understand that homesickness is not a weakness but rather a common response for college students who have left home.

- Find ways to keep in touch. Friends and family should send cards, letters, and e-mails to the college student. Phone your student once in a while if you can. Keeping in touch is important for all involved.
- Plan a trip home. This gives the college student something to look forward to. And it limits impulsive trips home that cost both money and time.
- Encourage an active search for a new activity or new hobby. There are more options at college than ever dreamed of in high school. New experiences are a good way to learn more about themselves and to meet new people. Most of the activities cost little to nothing to participate in.
- Emphasize that they should make time for exercise, get enough sleep, and eat nutritious food. Good sleep habits, good nutrition, and exercise can also reduce stress and feelings of anxiety.
- Suggest that they get involved in campus activities and clubs. This is a great way for students to meet others with similar likes. Encourage your student to join in and become part of campus life.

College students have a sense of freedom that they may not have had at home. They will have to make decisions pertaining to alcohol and drugs. They may also have to deal with new types of peer pressure. They may come to believe that alcohol and drugs are a way to deal with stress.

Nothing can replace open, honest discussion with your college-bound son or daughter about these subjects. Research has shown that parents discussing these topics with their children can help prevent the use of alcohol (Turrisi et al. 2002). According to the Substance Abuse Prevention and Health Enhancement Office at Syracuse University, the Higher Education Center, and the Virginia Department of Alcoholic Beverage Control (Education Section), the conversations should

- ◆ ...be started with respect, not punishment. For example, instead of initiating a conversation with, “You better not be drinking if you know what is good for you! I am still your parent!” it would be better to say, “I am a little worried about alcohol and drugs. I really care about you and it scares me. Can we talk about it?”
- ◆ ...be held at the appropriate time. For example, don’t try to “lecture” during a time of crisis or when you are mad. Instead, find times that both of you are relaxed. Talk about how these issues are reported in the news, on television, on the Internet, or even in a book. Talk about what happened to the people in the stories and how the incidents could have been prevented. Don’t expect to “solve everything” in one

talk. You and your son or daughter must conduct an on-going conversation—all your lives.

- ◆ ...offer education on the use of alcohol and drugs. Use facts, not scare tactics. Make sure that you don’t glamorize the use of these substances. Discussing all the times you were “three sheets to the wind” or “drunk as a skunk” doesn’t promote safe behavior. Remember: even though your children are now young adults, you are still a role model to them. Do your actions correspond with your expectations? Don’t turn to drugs or alcohol when you are stressed; instead, be a positive role model. Remind your son or daughter that although they may not drink, drinking by their peers may become an issue. Suggest where to go for help—the housing director, counselor, professor, or even campus police.
- ◆ ...cover your priorities and expectations. Don’t assume that your son or daughter knows what you want from them. Make sure they know. Discuss issues such as class attendance, grades, classes, jobs, money management, free time, and alcohol and drugs. If you expect certain grades, class attendance, and money management, and if the student knows what these expectations are and understands the consequences of not meeting the expectations, then he or she may not have the time, money, or desire to drink or do drugs despite peer pressures to do so.
- ◆ ...include listening as well as talking. Make sure you hear the college-bound student’s concerns or point of view—they may surprise you.
- ◆ ...offer support. Young adults need to feel appreciated, respected, and loved by their parents—although sometimes that’s the last thing they would admit. Don’t just focus on the facts, but also focus on feelings. Let your children know that you love and support them. Going away to college is a wonderful time in a person’s life. But it can be filled with stress. Take the time to learn what those stressors can be, and work with your son or daughter to help prevent them or cope with them.

The most important gift parents can give their young adults is the gift of communication. Make sure your son or daughter knows you are ready for a talk at any time. Take time to share your own concerns with your son or daughter. Listen to them with respect and understanding.

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