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# Psychological Problems of College Freshmen

By Charles H. Scheidler, Ph. D.

The problems facing the college freshman are similar to those of the upperclassman, but they are magnified and exaggerated by the novice. The problem facing the greatest number of college students is mental health and lack of self-worth caused in part by what Bloss<sup>1</sup> calls maturational stress and strain. He says the college student has prolonged his adolescence into chronological adulthood. The stresses created lead to mental health as the tormented generation. It points out, for example, that suicide is the seventh major cause of death amongst college age students not in college; whereas, suicide is the second major cause of death amongst college students.<sup>2</sup>

Mental health is America's number one health problem. Facts show one out of ten will receive psychiatric care, and conservative estimates state at least two more need such help but do not get it.

The two major factors of mental health are the reality principle and the self-worth concept. The reality principle, in oversimplified summarization, states that one must learn to accept the real world as it really is and his real self as it really is. He must learn to accept his basic impulses, both "good" and "bad" and his strengths as well as his weaknesses. *But* every human being experiences frustration daily. Frustration is defined as the feeling we experience when a drive toward a goal is blocked, thwarted, or postponed.<sup>3</sup> Consequently, a frustration, in layman's terminology, is failure; hence, every human being experiences failure daily. To experience failure daily constitutes a threat to one's ego, to his self-esteem. To avoid this constant threat, one distorts reality to protect his self-esteem, he would be so far removed from the real world that he would not and could not function as a part of it. Every individual distorts reality through ego-defense mechanisms and through less acceptable techniques, such as alcoholism, flights into fantasy or into illness. The well-adjusted individual strives to create a harmonious balance between accepting reality and preserving self-worth. He must distort reality but, in general, the less he has to engage in such distortions the more secure and stable he is.

The self is the "I" or "me" part of our personality. Each of us has a concept of self and each of us decides how *worthy* that self is. Man also has a self-ideal. This ideal self is the standard against which a person evaluates his behavior.

1 Peter Bloss, "Psychological Counseling of College Students," from Arthur Brayfield's *Readings in Modern Methods of Counseling*, Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1950, pp. 231-241.

2 Morton N. Hunt and Rena Cormen, "Tormented Generation," *Saturday Evening Post*, October 12, 1963, pp. 30-34.

3 Norman R. Maier, *Psychology in Industry*, Houghton Mifflin Co., 1955, pp. 78-79.

It is a personal, internal standard although originally its values were learned from our parents and from our social and cultural environment. To the extent that we perceive our "real" self coming close to the ideal self we are well-adjusted and stable (as long as we have not had to distort reality to perceive this unity of self-structure). To the extent that we perceive discrepancies between the "real" self and the ideal self, we have a disunity of self-structure and a lack of security and stability. <sup>4</sup>

Frustration, threat to our ego, and distortion of reality occur when one fails to reach the goals dictated by one's ideal self. Such failures lower self-worth and lead to feelings of inadequacy or of inferiority. These feelings of inadequacy manifest themselves in "hurt feelings" and in "hypersensitivity."<sup>5</sup> A person never gets his feelings hurt in areas where he feels confident and competent.

There is no relationship between feelings of inferiority and true inferiority (if there is such a thing). Feelings of inferiority are dictated by our own personal subjective inner standards. What human being is truly inferior or superior is not for mortal man to decide. A person with an I.Q. of 140 can feel just as inferior about his intelligence as one with an I.Q. of 80. A student with a 3.8 average can feel as inferior as one with a 1.8 average. An incentive worker who turns out 48 pieces of work in an hour can feel just as inadequate as one who turns out 28 pieces an hour depending on his inner standards.

Many of the following observations are based on the results of the *Guilford-Zimmerman Temperament Survey* taken by thousands of University of Dayton students. Those college students who show the greatest feelings of inferiority are those whom I call "perfectionists." It is not enough to be reasonably bright, nice looking, healthy, or young; they have to be the best. They form a rigid dichotomy. Either they are best, or they are worst. They are oblivious to the fact that most of us must fall somewhere in between the extremes in most aspects of our life and behavior.

The tools of Psychology are not exact and precise. We cannot measure a person's exact mental or physical capacities; but each of us, as he lives life, comes to have a fairly realistic picture of at least a range of abilities beyond which he cannot go. The perfectionistic, oversensitive individual has a self-ideal which blindly ignores this capacity range. He strives for perfection. He is not satisfied no matter how close he comes, thus he makes himself vulnerable to prolonged feelings of worthlessness. He may feel worthless even though his fellow men may feel he has made many contributions to society. No one has ever met a perfect human being. No one can ever expect to meet one, and yet the perfectionist insists that he must be one. These standards of perfection are not based on logic but rather on subjective emotionalized feelings.

The self-ideal of the hypersensitive individual dictates goals which neither he nor any other human being can reach. Instead of evaluating these goals and making

<sup>4</sup> David Krech and Richard Crutchfield, *Elements of Psychology*, Alfred A. Knopf, 1958, pp. 201-215.

<sup>5</sup> *Guilford-Zimmerman Temperament Survey*, Sheridan Supply Co., California, 1955.

them more realistic, he bitterly criticizes and condemns himself for not succeeding. No matter how well he does, no matter how hard he tries, he can not win in his own eyes. Emotionally, he goes around like a television set with its antennae out, looking for and expecting others to peer right through him and see these "horrible" inadequacies. When one goes looking for such criticisms, one usually finds them. In the final analysis of life what others think is not important. It is what one thinks of himself that is. A person needs to learn to accept self, to be comfortable with it and yes, even to like it.

As a result of failing to reach the goals of his self-ideal, the hypersensitive person manifests many other personality traits. Such an individual frequently shows a tremendous amount of drive and energy. He has to, because he can not relax within himself. On the other hand he sometimes shows no energy at all. This phenomenon is called the paralysis of perfectionism.<sup>6</sup> He is often overserious and restrained. He can not let his hair down. He holds people at a distance lest they get too close, become too friendly, and find out what he is really like. Frequently he is warm and friendly but can not show his affection to others. He is often submissive. He thinks, "Who am I to assert myself?" He keeps his mouth shut even when it comes to protecting his own rights. He will do much to avoid a scene or argument, he lets others push him around, and, too often, he pays too heavy a price for this meekness, especially if inwardly he resents being dominated.

The individual who lacks self-worth is most frequently shy. He is afraid of his peers, especially those of the opposite sex. He may be afraid to speak in front of a group or to talk to an older person. What is he afraid of? "They won't like me." "I'll say the wrong thing." "They wouldn't be interested in what I have to say." He evaluates himself and projects the valuation onto others. He evaluates himself badly. He does not approve of himself and thus can not expect others to approve of him.

He also has repressed hostility — hostility because he resents people constantly picking at his imaginary horrible inadequacies, and repressed because he is too submissive, too afraid, to find an outlet for his aggression. This repressed hostility manifests itself in moodiness, anxiety, nervousness and tension. He may be a meditative person but much of his capacity for creative thinking is dissipated in fantasy, a fantasy which enables him to run away from himself and not face up to his conflicts.

He is also inclined to be critical of others. He may not voice his criticism aloud, but at least in his own mind he finds himself running others down. Why? His self ideal has set impossible goals. When he fails to reach them, he criticizes himself. This self-criticism pulls down his ego. He looks for criticism from others and finds it. His ego is pulled down even lower. He then internally criticizes and finds fault with others and by this means, unconsciously tries to convince himself that others are worse than he is, thus he is not so bad after all. The tragedy is that there is no reason for his ego being down. Every individual is a person with a great deal of

<sup>6</sup> Krech and Crutchfield, p. 222.

human dignity. Each of us must learn to realize this fact. Truly, the hypersensitive individual is a far better person than he realizes. He finds himself in a very difficult dilemma. Most frequently he has a strong desire to be liked by others (too often to be liked by everyone which is a total impossibility), but how can he expect others to like him if he does not like himself. It is possible, if society rewards him enough, that he can learn to have greater self-worth. Mental health, emotional maturity, and personal happiness are among the most important of our lifetime goals. To obtain these goals, one must learn to accept and to like himself. To do this he must evaluate the goals of his self-ideal and make his goals more realistic and less perfectionistic. Once he has established realistic goals, he must give his best in an attempt to reach them. And whether he reaches them or not is not important as long as he knows he has tried. He must quit tearing himself down and instead build himself up *in his own* eyes. He must remember that he has a great deal of human dignity. He is a worthwhile person. He must believe it, practice believing it, and act accordingly.

Another problem of college students is what psychologists call "separation anxiety," which sounds more professional than "homesickness." Many students act bold and undaunted on the campus walkways but will admit their loneliness behind the closed door of the counselor's office. Many are away from the safe security of home for the first time. It is not difficult to understand their loneliness and apprehension. It would be more difficult to understand a person being void of such temporary feelings.

One of the greatest fears is the fear of the unknown. To most college freshmen, college is the unknown. "Is it as tough as they say?" "Will I be one of the dropouts?" "Will they find out how much I didn't learn in high school?" "Will there be enough hours in the day?" "Have I got what it takes?" These are just a few of the apprehensive questions that frequently fill and befuddle the mind of the college freshman, and make him long for home.

In addition, he far too often walks into a course and finds a stern professor who tells him how tough he is, how tough the course is, and how poor his chances are. Many a college freshman thinks, "Oh, Boy, he means me!" and internally wails, "I want to go home!" A number of freshmen fail courses on the first day of the semester because they become convinced they will fail and they block on tests.

This blocking on a test is one of the most severe problems facing the sincere, conscientious, highly motivated student. Hundreds of students seek help from counselors in an effort to solve this problem. They maintain they study hard and know the material well before they go into class, but frequently when they start answering the test questions they can hardly remember their own name. Some students block so badly they turn in a blank paper. Others will miss a large block of answers, and some will answer every question but not know what they are writing.

Psychologists and guidance counselors have discovered certain rules which apply to this problem. In the first place a student never blocks on material that he

knows and *he knows* he knows. However, it is quite possible to block on material if he doesn't know that he knows it. The first suggestion to the blocking student, then, is study the material between tests every day so that early on the evening before the day of the test he should be able to close his book and say "Let it come; I've got it."

In the second place nobody ever blocks on a test if he does not care about the out-come. A student who blocks on a test, is a sincere, conscientious and *over-motivated* student. The play boy who does not care about grades may fail, but if he does, it is because he did not study, not because he blocked on a test. It is possible that more students fail out of school because of trying too hard rather than because of not trying hard enough.

The second suggestion to the student is to study hard and be highly motivated while he is studying. He should distribute his studying time evenly from the last test to the next one. Once he has closed his book for the last time before the test his attitude should be, "The heck with it. There's nothing I can do about the outcome now. Worrying can hurt me and it sure won't help me. If I make it, all right. If I don't make it, all right. At least I have the satisfaction of knowing I tried and that is all anyone can ask of me, including myself." The above attitude is a very difficult one to develop, but the wise student will work hard over a long period of time to develop it and believe it.

We have used the term "block" throughout this article. The term should be preceded by the word emotional. The meaning implied is that, when we are emotionally aroused, these emotions block the functioning of the higher brain processes. The following explanation of this blocking process is theoretical, not necessarily factual.

Man has a central nervous system which consists of nerve fibers that go into every muscle of his body. The fibers gather together into bundles and become the spinal cord. The spinal cord enters the head and there we find the lower brain centers which are white in color. At the top of the white brain matter comes the gray matter and the top of the gray matter is the cerebral cortex. This cortex dictates to the entire central nervous system, so much so that this nervous system is called the voluntary nervous system. Any action of the body that we can control is controlled by the cerebral cortex. This cortex is the seat of our higher mental processes. Our learning, memory, intelligence, thinking, judgement and wisdom are all stored there. When we study, the material we learn is stored in the cortex and when we take a test we try to pull the material from the cortex to put down on the paper.

But man has a second nervous system. Lying outside of the spinal cord are huge dumps of nerve fibers. These fibers interconnect with each other. A few of them go to the spinal cord and are controlled by the brain. The great bulk of these fibers go to the visceral organs. They innervate the lungs, diaphragm, heart, stomach, intestine, bladder, bowel and other internal organs. A number of them go to our endocrine glands such as the pituitary, thyroid and adrenal glands. This second

nervous system is called the involuntary system because it is not under man's complete control. It is also referred to as man's emotional nervous system. When man becomes frightened, angry, in love, or experiences some other emotional state, this involuntary system goes into action. It changes our brain waves, increases our perspiration, respiration and also our pulse and blood pressure. These are the physical mechanisms measured by the lie detector tests. In addition, the emotional nervous system affects our digestion and in extreme emotion can even discharge the bowel or bladder.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the involuntary nervous system also causes the endocrine glands to discharge their chemicals into the blood stream. These chemicals, called hormones, are very powerful. They are picked up by small blood vessels, carried into the main blood stream and finally to the brain. In *theory*, it is as though these endocrine chemicals act as a temporary toxic or poison to the brain, preventing it from fulfilling its function of clear learning, thinking and reasoning.

The present theory postulates that a little emotion impairs memory and thinking a little bit and a lot of emotion seriously impairs brain functioning. The most extreme example of this emotional impairment is "temporary insanity." Somewhere down the line comes emotional blocking on important tests. The order is, too much motivation; fear of failure; bodily reaction; and finally temporary intellectual impairment or blocking.

We now have stated the three major problems in blocking. First, a student will not block if he knows the material and knows he knows it. He should put enough time in on the material so that when the test comes he can say, "Let it come, I may not have it completely mastered, but I know enough to do well." Second, he does not block if he is not too highly motivated during the test. As a solution, his motivation should be high enough to make him study each day in preparation for the test, but once he closes his book for the last time before the test, his attitude should be, "The heck with it. I've done what I can." These first two solutions require a good deal of self-confidence and may not become entrenched until the individual has had some success.

The major cause of blocking is permitting the emotional system to get out of control and allowing it to dominate the brain. The best way to solve this problem is to be aware of its existence. Whenever one is taking a test and panics he has some warnings ahead of time. He must heed these warnings. When he finds himself becoming tense or afraid, he should stop, put down his pencil, lean back in his chair, close his eyes, and say to himself, "Okay, which will it be? Am I going to let my emotions dictate to me, or am I going to sit here until I can restore calm and answer the questions on the basis of the knowledge I have stored in my brain." He might say, "But the time." Even then, it is better to miss some problems because of time than it is to be panicky and finish the problems and get them all wrong.

Many students have been encouraged to try these solutions. With some they

failed, probably because the emotions were just too strong to control. But more students have reported they have been able to overcome blocking with this method than with any other they have encountered.

Another problem facing college students is that many come from small towns or small schools where everybody knows everybody else. Frequently, the student was pretty bright in high school; everyone knew of his brightness and accepted him and came to him. Now, on a rather large campus, he is just another unknown student. He has to prove himself and get himself accepted. He has to go forward at least halfway to meet others, and for some, this is an ordeal. Furthermore, he finds on this large campus many students who are as bright as he is and some even brighter. To add to this problem, he may yearn for home and hometown friends or for a boyfriend or a girlfriend back home.

Perhaps the greatest cause of homesickness on the college campus is the lack of a respected adult to be accepted by, to talk to, to confide in, and to seek advice from. Most college freshmen have someone back home — a parent, a big brother or sister, another relative, or a friend. In college, especially if one lives in a dorm, one cannot talk to one's room-mate or peers because they are involved or embroiled in the very things that need to be discussed.

In addition to separation anxiety, there are many specific individual problems. Home adjustment problems, study habits, physical and health problems, sexual problems and conflicts, religious and moral problems, emotional difficulties, social adjustment problems, and academic deficiencies are just a few.

Another problem is the *stress* created in many college students because they do not know what course to pursue. It is not so much the choice of a vocational or educational objective; it is the stress, the anxiety that results because a student does not know and feels he should.

Society is to be blamed for this stress. The colleges themselves, the high schools, the parents, and even their peers seem to point their finger at the college student and say, "What! You're in college and you don't know what you want to be? Tsk! Tsk!" Most colleges tell the student he must pick a school or division before he can be accepted, and to the student this almost boils down to a flip of a coin. Furthermore, many students who do pick a career have no real knowledge of what is involved in the day-to-day activity of that given profession.

Too often the college student accepts the blame and accompanying guilt feelings. Too often he feels inadequate because other students know what they are going to do or be and he does not. The truth of the matter is that the great majority of college students do not know what they will do when they graduate from college. In fact, a large number of college graduates wind up in work for which they have had no training in college. Furthermore, many college students change majors at least once before they graduate.

What advice is there for the college freshman? It can be summarized in one



word — acceptance. Above all he must learn to accept himself as a worth-while person with a great deal of human dignity. He must learn to accept the fact that he is a little lonely, a little blue, a little homesick. He must learn to meet others halfway by joining clubs, going to dances, and making every effort to meet new, interesting and different types of friends.

He should decide that once in college, he will give his class work his best, and whether he passes or fails is not really important, as long as he knows within himself he has tried. He must realize he has not worked long enough, nor lived long enough, to know what he wants to be. Each course taken should be viewed with an open mind and as a potential life profession. Knowing that most other college students do not know should be a comfort to him.

Above all, he must learn to live in the time perspective *present*. He should not wait until he is an alumnus before he says, “Gee, we did have some good times then.” His college years should be among the happiest years of his life. He must work hard, and study hard, but also allow himself time for recreation and relaxation. In college one should learn to be a scholar, but also should learn to be a socially and emotionally mature person as well.