No time for a social life! [1]

Dear Alice,

I am a 22-year old male grad student, now starting my second semester at SIPA. I have been doing very well academically, but my studies and my work-study job leave me absolutely no time for a social life! I have not been on a date since I got here; though I meet a lot of interesting people, and am in the habit of collecting their phone numbers. However, I can never seem to find any time to spend with them. Sometimes this really depresses me. I have noticed that I have lately been smoking much more heavily than I used to.

Sincerely,
Always in a rush to get something done

Answer

Dear Always in a rush to get something done,

Among the piles of books that need to be read, papers that need to be written, tests that need to be studied for, and jobs that need to be worked, how on earth does one go about dating and having an active social life? School work (professors, colleagues, TAs, looming assignments, etc.) calls out for your attention. Loudly. So do work study jobs. Current friends, partners, pets, and neglected family members also will hail for your time and attention. But new people in your life, and those whom you have not yet met, do not make such demands. To make time for these will require some additional initiative on your part. In other words, try to notice how much of a priority new friends or prospective dates are for you right now. It may change on a regular basis, but when you notice it spiking for you, here are some tips to create time and space for these new opportunities.

- The good news is that you are meeting people and collecting phone numbers. To turn these numbers into something more meaningful for you, try making a commitment to call one of these people once during the week.
- Consider using that phone call to plan a time to get together with the person. If you’re too busy, make it a study date or meet over a meal (studying and eating are probably activities you would be doing anyway).
- Notice your feelings of depression. Do they abate some when you have social interaction? Use this as positive reinforcement? for yourself. You’re probably more productive at school when you’re happier. But that aside, you deserve some social interaction and some down time. Reward yourself for getting things done by building
quality relationships, even if it happens slowly over time, as little as once a week.

You also mention smoking more in response to stress. This is quite common because nicotine provides the illusion of lessening some of the negative feelings or behaviors associated with stress (e.g., anxiety, irritability, anger). Physiologically speaking, though, your body becomes more stressed due to smoking: blood vessels constrict, less oxygen flows to your brain, heart rate and blood pressure increase, and of course, lungs suffer, as well. Smoke breaks often result in stress making it harder to quit. I'll never be able to step away from my work without the excuse of a smoke break, think many of the stressed, smoking masses. If this is the case for you, see if you may find other excuses (such as self care, your sanity, a snack, a walk, a social phone call) to take a break. If you can, try to structure your social time in ways that don’t reinforce or encourage smoking.

School may put a damper on the social life, but it doesn’t have to eliminate it altogether. Browse through other Q&As in the Stress & Anxiety archives for more time management tips. Juggling dating and social activities with all your other commitments may seem impossible, but with some planning, you can do it. Elevating your mood is reason enough to give it the ol’ grad student try!?

Alice!
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