Starting college at 30 — Coping with stress? [1]

Dear Alice,

How much more stressful is college on a non-traditional student, and what are some good ways to deal with college stress at 30?

Answer

Dear Reader,

Every person comes to college with different life experiences. Regardless of the path taken to get to college, everyone experiences stress differently, so it can be hard to say that it would be more or less stressful on a given person. Some may have come straight from high school, while others may be veterans, care takers, parents, or working professionals. Some may have wanted to travel before coming to college, while others may simply have not yet been ready to attend. Ultimately, everyone’s timelines for attending college varies as they determine what fits best into their own lives, but many of the challenges can be similar. While college students are often thought of as the recent high school graduate who lives on campus and graduates in four years, the reality is that there’s a large percentage of students who don’t follow that trajectory. In fact, students older than 25 make up almost 40 percent of class constituencies and may be balancing career advancements, families, and work schedules in addition to hitting the books. It’s possible that this balancing act can cause more stress, but it may be that they have different tools and strategies to pull upon to manage this stress. One way to manage it is to be aware of what additional stressors may affect you as an older student. Doing so can help you effectively come up with strategies and plans to mitigate that stress. Taking advantage of resources that the university offers and stress management strategies used in the past may be a good first step to navigating this transition.

As you may already be aware, one of the largest sources of stress for students is academics. Some may find the academics to be more challenging since they’ve been away from the school environment for a longer period of time. For some, it may take a little bit longer to adjust back to sitting in a classroom and doing homework assignments. For others, the lives they’ve led between their school experiences contributes to their academic success. They can draw on that life experience to inform the work they’re doing in the classroom. However, most students, regardless of age or life experiences, feel some stress over their academics at some point, so if
this is one of your concerns, you certainly won’t be alone.

For many students, finances, or paying for college, may be a source of stress. If finances are a concern for you, students of all backgrounds are eligible for federal financial aid and assistance programs for continuing education, usually in the form of loans. Though scholarships may be harder to come by for students who’ve been out of high school for some time, employers may offer Tuition Assistance Programs (TAP) as part of their benefits packages. You may also be eligible for work study jobs on your campus.

It’s also possible that day care, commuting, and housing are sources of stress for college students and may be a source of stress for you. As more universities are seeing the enrollment of students with more diverse life experiences, many have catered programs or services accordingly. For example, some schools recognize how helpful it can be to provide child care facilities or partner with child care centers close to campus. Similarly, while colleges may not have much to offer in terms of parking space or commuting assistance, it might be good to see if the university has partnerships with local parking garages to make commuting for day and evening classes less burdensome. If public transportation is an option for you, it may also be helpful to look into whether there are any discounted rates for students. Additionally, the housing department on-campus might be able to offer suggestions or resources for finding off-campus housing if they don’t have designated residences that meet your needs.

Whatever the source(s) of your stress may be, there are a number of stress management tools you can use. In moments that you feel particularly stressed, you may find it helpful to do some deep breathing exercises (to learn about one exercise example, Helpguide.org [2] has more information). You may also find that doing body scans [3] or progressive muscle relaxation activities [4] help relieve your stress. Making time for the activities that you enjoy can also be a source of stress relief, such as reading a book, watching a movie, going outside for a walk, spending time with your friends and family, or whatever makes you happy. Although you may be starting a new chapter of your life, if you’ve found successful stress management tools in the past, you can still draw on them to help you now, even in a new setting. You can also look for support within your new community. Depending on the school, there may also exist adult student groups that offer a valuable sense of community in this new learning environment. Dedicated groups like these often discuss the challenges of being an older student and provide social and service opportunities on and off campus. You may find it helpful to search for groups of students that have similar backgrounds or can provide more tailored support. For example, if you’re a veteran, it may be helpful to look for veteran student groups to meet other students like you. Being among these peers can also serve as a reminder about all the great ways they contribute to the academic and campus environment.

Before starting college, it might help to talk with the student affairs department (or equivalent office) about the resources and programs offered for students with background similar to yours. That way, you can be aware of the sources of support before encountering particularly stressful situations. If you aren’t finding the resources or community connections that you’re looking for, sharing your desire for them with other students and campus administrators may help spark their creation! And in doing so, you may also help to fill a gap in support for your fellow students.
Best of luck entering this studious phase of life!

Alice!
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