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## **Uncomfortable with college stresses** [1]

Dear Alice

Until college, I was able to handle stress very well. I managed many responsibilities in and out of school, and was thrilled when I was accepted here. Now that I am here, however, I feel unusually unable to deal with daily stresses. I find myself sleeping more than I used to; I have difficulty focusing on work, and the feelings of stress that come upon me seem always to bring extra feelings of depression and confusion. I have decided to cut down on my drinking in order to keep up with my work, but it was never much of a problem before anyway. I don't use drugs, and I don't feel as though I have a hard time making friends. I am not, I don't think, homesick. I am however, somehow uncomfortable with college stresses. I know this isn't much to go on, but can you offer any insight? I don't feel crazy or insane, just a bit uncomfortable.

— Dazed and Confused...

### **Answer**

Dear Dazed and Confused...,

College can be an exciting milestone, but as you've discovered, all the changes can bring some discomfort and stress. You're in a new environment, with new people, learning new things, and there may be new cultures or customs you've never encountered. It's great that you've already started to make changes that you feel may be beneficial. It's also helpful that you've been able to identify what has been going well, such as making friends. You may also find that you adjust more with time. That said, there are some strategies that might help jumpstart your adjustment.

In a place where most everyone is a bright-eyed and bushy-tailed newbie, you can hardly be expected to hit the ground running without a hiccup or two. College isn't easy: maybe it's the first time you've lived away from your family, maybe you're in an unfamiliar city (or country!), or maybe you're taking classes in subjects that are totally new to you. So, first, give yourself a genuine pat on the back. You've taken a big step outside by deciding to come to college in the first place. Based on what you've described, you're already on your way to adjusting by making new friends, avoiding excessive substance use, and asking this question. Here are a few more ideas of how you can take care of yourself and get the most out of this collegiate adventure you're on:

- **Get back to basics:** When it comes to reducing stress, it can be helpful to make sleep, nutrition, and physical activity priorities. Doing these activities can help the body to manage stress and reduce some of the impacts your body may feel from the stress response. If you find it challenging to make any adaptations to your sleep, nutrition, or physical activity, start small. These smaller changes can help lead to larger changes over time.
- **Establish a routine:** When it feels like the world is spinning a mile a minute, having a regular routine to fall back on can be a huge relief. College may be your first chance to make decisions about your schedule and how you manage your time (and it can be tempting to choose classes that allow you to sleep 'til noon!), but getting on a regular schedule for sleeping, eating, and studying might give you the peace of mind you're seeking.
- **Connect with others:** Most colleges have lots of free events to attend and clubs to join, and if you're living on campus, your residence hall might have events or a common space where all the action takes place. Not only will you have fun hanging out with others, but you may be able to swap some tips for adjusting to and managing your new lives at college.
- **Resist the urge to do it all:** You mentioned that before college you felt like you could juggle many responsibilities easily. However, if you think back a couple of years, it probably took you a while to get to that point, right? Consider taking on responsibilities slowly rather than trying to "do it all" right away. Before you know it, things may start to feel easy-breezy once again!
- **Reframe your stressors:** You may find it helpful to try to reframe your stressors or to think about them from a new perspective. What is the stressor and how are you reacting to it? Is that how you'd like to react? How can you move forward and think about the situation in a new way? What are some resources you can turn to for support? Thinking about these questions can help you think about what causes stress and think about it in a new way.
- **Take a breath:** There are a number of stress management techniques such as deep breathing, [progressive muscle relaxation](#) [2], and [body scan meditations](#) [3], among others, that could be helpful in reducing your stress. Even taking a few minutes each day can provide some benefits and release some tension.

This transition might also be a good time for a little self-reflection on your time in college thus far: What aspects of college life have you enjoyed most? What have been your biggest stressors? How has college been different from past experiences? What roles did you leave behind? Do you have new roles? Once you start to define your stressors, you may be able to manage them more effectively.

And remember: you're not alone! You might consider reaching out to a [mental health professional](#) [4], member of the clergy, trusted friend, faculty member, or mentor about your concerns. Your college might also have a health promotion department that offers programs such as free back rubs, sleep tips, time management workshops, knitting nights, and more! Just remember that lots (and lots and lots!) of students are going through similar transitions and have similar questions — check out the related questions on this page, if you don't believe it! You're all in this amazing, scary, and thrilling experience together!

Challenges and new experiences, while intimidating, also help people to grow. It's great that you're taking the initiative to be honest with yourself about your discomfort: the first step toward changing your experience for the better is recognizing that there are changes you'd like to see!

Alice!

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