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No time for a social life! ^[1]

Dear Alice,

I am a 22-year-old male grad student, now starting my second semester at in graduate school. 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 a person go about dating and having an active social life? School work (professors, colleagues, teaching assistants, looming assignments, etc.) calls out for your attention — loudly. So do work-study jobs. Current friends, partners, pets, and neglected family members also may hail for your time and attention. But new people in your life and those whom you haven't met yet don't make such demands. To make time for these will require some intentionality and prioritization on your part.

It seems like you've already identified that you want to date and you want to develop more friendships, which is a great start. To go a little deeper, it may be worth considering what you hope to get out of these endeavors, and why you think you want to pursue them now. Understanding what you want to get out of relationships and why can be key to setting yourself up for fulfillment. No one person will satisfy all of your needs, but if you're clear about them, then you can apply more specific approaches to connecting with folks seeking similar characteristics and level of commitment within a relationship. In addition, it may also be helpful to pair this with considering what you value most (for example: a sense of dedication or commitment) and then how you'd like to express that in your life. It can be hard to turn down potential opportunities, but if you're clear about those values, you may find it easier to make decisions with confidence about

how you spend your time. Ultimately, there are a finite number of hours per day, and you're the only one who can decide how much time to dedicate to those priorities.

To help you think about applying this, here is an example: if the needs you identify are that you want romantic partnership, relationships that challenge you intellectually, and lighter relationships oriented around more spontaneity and activities, you might pursue three different strategies to satisfy each of these needs:

- You might utilize a dating app or website to look for romantic partnership, or pursue dates with someone you have already met for romantic partnership.
- You might join a new study, book, or conversation group for intellectual challenge.
- You might attend regular physical activity or meditation classes to meet others who engage in a somewhat similar routine to you and they might fulfill that spontaneity need.

If these also align with some of your larger priorities, you might feel even more fulfilled by meeting and developing relationships with folks who are also engaging in activities you're doing as you're working towards your goals. While this is just one example, you may find that you also have identified multiple needs or priorities. If you do, it may be helpful to not focus on them all at the same time. You may want to break it down and choose one to focus on first, and then you can decide when it feels right to shift into focusing on another.

In addition, if you're feeling that connecting with folks you've met is a high priority and you're ready to act, here are some tips to help get you going:

- The good news is that you're meeting people and collecting phone numbers. To turn these numbers into meaningful action, you could 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? This could be a form of positive reinforcement for yourself. You may find that you're more productive at school when you're happier. But that aside, you deserve some social interaction and some down time. You could reward yourself for your bits of interaction by building quality relationships, even if it happens slowly over time, as little as once a week.

Shifting gears a bit, you also mention smoking more in response to stress. This is quite common because nicotine can provide the illusion of lessening some of the negative feelings or behaviors associated with stress (e.g., anxiety, irritability, anger). Physiologically speaking though, your body produces more of a stress response 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," is a thought bubble above the heads of many of the stressed, smoking masses. If this is the case for you, it may be worth it to find other reasons (such as self-care, a snack, a walk, a social phone call) to take a break. If you can, you might 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. You

could browse through other Q&As in the [Go Ask Alice! Stress & Anxiety](#) [2] section for more time management tips. Juggling dating and social activities with all your other commitments may seem impossible, but with some intentionality, prioritizing, and planning, you can do it. Elevating your mood and feeling more fulfilled are reasons enough to give it the good ol' "grad student try."

Alice!

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