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. Needless to say, feeling confused or down while you adjust is not unusual. There are some strategies ? such as sticking to a regular routine, talking out your feelings with a friend or mental health care provider, or practicing regular self-care ? that might help jumpstart your adjustment. But, remember that your ability to manage stress and responsibilities will likely improve with time. A key ingredient in your ability to handle these stressors may be having a bit of patience and resisting the urge to be too hard on yourself as you find your groove.

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 (Astronomy?! Arabic?! Accounting?!). 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 alcohol and drug use, and asking this question. Here are a few more ideas of how you can take care
Start with some self-care: The idea here is to regularly inventory how you’re feeling, physically and emotionally, and then take steps to maximize your well-being. Examples of self-care include taking up meditation [2], making time to laugh with some new friends (laughter can be the best medicine!), or going on a jog [3] — really, any activity that makes you happy and promotes your physical and mental health!

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. Consider checking out Time management [4] in the Go Ask Alice! archives for some starter tips!

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!

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 care provider [5], clergyperson, trusted friend, faculty member, or mentor about your concerns. Your college might also have a student wellness department that offers programs like free back rubs, sleep tips [6], time management workshops, student support groups, 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 us grow. It?s great that you’re taking the initiative to be honest with yourself about your discomfort: the first step toward changing things for the better is admitting things don’t seem right!

Alice!
Category:
Emotional Health [7]
Stress & Anxiety [8]
Related questions

Stressed out and anxious from schoolwork and everything [9]
Stress at the start of school [10]
Homesick and having trouble adjusting to college life [12]

Resources

Counseling and Psychological Services (CPS) (Morningside) [13]
Nightline (Morningside/Barnard) [14]
Stressbusters (Morningside) [15]
Mental Health Service (CUMC) [16]
a!Sleep website [17]
Stressbust Yourself Toolkit [18]

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