

Back-to-School Mental Health Tips for College Students

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College is a wonderful time of learning and self-discovery for young adults. Unfortunately, it is also a period of great emotional instability with the potential for serious consequences. As college students learn who they are, what they believe and are making life-altering decisions about their futures, make sure they are doing so with the best mental health thanks to these tips.

Preparing for a new school year is a stressful time for students and parents, especially when back-to-school means leaving home for college for the first time. But there are proactive steps students and parents can take to help ensure students have a happy and healthy college experience.

As a parent of previously college-aged children, Scottsdale-based Dr. Douglas Lakin shared these same concerns and desires. To help both college students and their parents, he co-authored *Thrive 101*. This health and wellness resource book provides students and parents with credible, useful information on how to stay healthy, happy and on track while enjoying college life to the fullest.

Dr. Lakin's top tips for helping students include knowing:

Where to go for help. Develop a support network by forming a group of close friends, staying in contact with family back home and getting to know the school's advisors and instructors. Students should identify and familiarize themselves with the college health center and staff. The more people students know at college, the more connected they will feel.

When to go for help. Students will feel most prepared in case of emergency if they are able to recognize signs and symptoms that represent critical health issues that require professional care. In terms of treating minor symptoms, Dr. Lakin suggests creating a home/dorm medical kit and being educated on what medicines to take and when. A home medical kit is a collection of over-the-counter supplies to have in handy in case of various medical needs. A shopping list to start a home medical kit would include: Sudafed, Chlor-Trimeton, Claritin, Advil or Aleve, bacitracin ointment, Band-Aid adhesive bandages and a digital thermometer.

The healthiest college students, both mentally and physically, are those who are active and eat well. Exercise is important for students' mental outlook and helps ward off depression. Students must remember to take a break from studies and get moving on a regular basis. And when faced with all-you-can-eat cafeterias and weekly late-night raids to go get pizza, instead choose a wide variety of healthy and nutritious foods.

Sleep is vital to students' mental well being, so it is of utmost importance to get enough of it. College students should try to go to bed at a reasonable hour and wake up at roughly the same time every day. Aim for no less than seven hours of sleep each night. To maximize sleep quality, keep bedrooms dark and quiet at night and avoid looking at computer and cell phone screens immediately prior to bed.

Why are these tips important? Students are more likely to get sick at college because illnesses spread quickly between large numbers of students in close proximity in dorms, cafeterias and classrooms. The Center for Disease Control (CDC) highlights the five most common college health concerns as poor nutrition and exercise; alcohol and alcohol-related injuries; sexually transmitted diseases; drug abuse, especially prescription drugs; anxiety and depression.

In 2011, the American College Health Association found that 62 percent of college students who withdrew from college did so for mental health reasons. And an estimated 75 percent of students with possible mental health issues did not seek the help they needed. Other studies show that 44 percent of American college students report having symptoms of depression. Students suffering from depression are more likely to binge drink, smoke marijuana and participate in risky sexual behaviors than peers who are not depressed.

Although it may feel like it at times, college students are never truly alone. There are many people, both on and off campus, available to help. Students must realize there is no shame in seeking professional help for any multitude of issues. Talking to a trusted adult about major concerns is sometimes needed more than the advice of close friends.

To purchase Dr. Lakin's college student health resource book *Thrive 101* for more mental health tips, visit Changing Hands Bookstore or online at iBookstore by Amazon and Nook by Barnes and Noble. To learn more about Dr. Lakin and his efforts to provide straightforward, accurate and accessible medical advice to Arizona patients and families, visit doctordoug.com.