

Turning a New Leaf

On Leaving the Nest & Handling Returns to It

by Crystal Garcia-Paul, MSED, LMHC, LCAC, NCC

College can be a wonderful, exciting new phase of life for both a young adult and their family. It can be pretty daunting too.

So why are such huge feelings normal?

Young adults are entering this new phase of life with both brand new stressors and heightened versions of the old ones - and all with a brain that is still developing. So, how do we as individuals, families, and friends assist our college students in their new journey? Let's talk about those stressors, and then some methods for helping.

After high school when many start college, the world hands a lot of responsibility to young adults. This cultural norm ignores that the brain isn't finished developing until well past that age.

Culturally, we consider adolescence over by 20. Though testing has indicated that behavioral maturation of the adolescent brain continues through the mid 20s. This means healthy decision-making, and management of stressors can be more difficult. Studies comparing an adolescent's brain to an adult brain have evidenced that the prefrontal cortices are used less by adolescents in studied situations, both interpersonally and in decision making, when compared with adults.¹ Though everyone develops differently due to their unique influences (i.e., genetics, social influences, lifestyle, etc.), the prefrontal cortex is known to reach full development near age 25 years old. Since the prefrontal cortex is responsible for more mature decision-making and judgement as well as emotion regulation, young adult college students are developmentally more likely to encounter difficulties managing stressors whether living at home or away during college years.

Considering the developmental stage in which they're being dealt with, new stressors can make decision making



quite difficult in any of the following likely challenges:

- Going to college in general
- Going away to college or staying at home
- Identifying a major
- Navigating how to make new friends
- Keeping old friends from high school
- Adapting to physiological changes
- Adjusting to greater independence
- Navigating crucial decision making that had not been asked of them before.

The student may have trouble adjusting to a new routine, new living quarters if living away from their family home, new expectations, unfamiliar faces, and new cultures typical of entering college. There will likely be new worries around managing finances, physical health, mental health, and social health. There are many unknowns, and unknowns can be anxiety-provoking for both the student and family.

**Continued inside with
'Tips on Adjusting to
College'**



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Pictured (left to right):

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Tips on Adjusting to College

1. It's okay to be unsure about change. Find what's going well and identify what isn't. These steps can help to shape positive change and lock-in new habits and preferences.
2. Know your support network, and do not be afraid to use them. It can be helpful to discuss how to stay connected with anyone important to you and make it easier to reach out..
3. Remember to aim for balance in new routines. This means creating and reworking routines to give yourself the best chance to be healthy and successful in all facets: academics, social life, mental health, physical health, finances, work, etc. Being mindful of what's in your control and what is not can help lower stress.
4. Make sure a new setting is as homey as possible. Find food you like, places to engage in your hobbies, places to meet people with similar interests. Family should discuss and encourage these efforts.
5. Know what gives you peace. Know what coping skills work for you. Be open to learning new ones. Established coping skills (ex. Distracting with a Healthy Hobby, Venting with a Friend) can get left behind during a major life transition.
6. Be aware of when more help is needed than your support system can offer. Scheduling to see a therapist or similar care provider can make all the difference. The 988 Lifeline is available to anyone for any level of emotional distress, including how to help with the distress of someone they care about.

¹(Araín, M., Haque, M., Johal, L., Mathur, P., Nel, W., Rais, A., Sandhu, R., & Sharma, S. (2013). Maturation of the adolescent brain. *Neuropsychiatric disease and treatment*, 9, 449–461. <https://doi.org/10.2147/NDT.S39776>)

When They Return to the Nest

As the seasons change and a child returns home for the holidays, you may also notice a change of seasons in the parent-child relationship. Perhaps it's how they speak to you, or a more relaxed adherence to the house rules established when they lived at home. These changes are normal. They reflect their developing independence and the influences their new life has brought along. Every change of season requires upkeep. Below are tips for helping this new one along.

Understand the stages of development. Developing brings psychological and physiological changes that influence our interactions with the world. As a young adult gains independence, they'll question previous norms - many of which were established by their parents.

Discuss! What does it mean to be an adult in college? Answers may differ. Discussing those differences will be helpful to understand how responsibilities and expectations at home may be reshaping.

Give respect and space. Get to know your child as their own individual. You may perceive them differently than they're working to be perceived. For them to be successful in this growth, they'll benefit from your support. That growth may require freedom to grow.

Revisit rules and boundaries. Avoid conflict by clearly communicating expectations.

Compromise. If your child feels they should be given more freedom at home, listen and react respectfully.

Consistency. Once boundaries are discussed and understood, be consistent in making sure they're respected.

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