When Your Student is Overwhelmed

Many students are guilty of it at one point or another: holding “I had less sleep than you did” or “I’m SO busy!” contests. This tends to be a particular phenomenon among student leaders, who are often some of the busiest students on campus. They swap tales of all-nighters, crammed schedules and three-page To Do lists, almost as a badge of honor, to prove that they are in demand and working hard.

If you suspect that your student is swamped and feeling overwhelmed, there are a few things you can do:

- Ask them to list out their activities and responsibilities for the semester. What time commitment is required for each per week?
- Then, ask them about things they want to accomplish this semester, whether it’s doing really well in a particular class, taking a Pilates class or spending good time with friends who will be graduating in May.

- Looking at their list of commitments, ask them where they are going to fit in their “wants.”
- Also, remind them of responsibilities that they may not have considered, such as getting their resume up to par for a summer/fall internship, researching grad schools or volunteering at the local social service agency as part of their coursework.

- Once the time commitments seem to be laid out, talk with your student about living with a crammed-full schedule. Is this how they want to operate? What happens if a friend needs them for moral support due to a death in the family? Will they only be able to be half there because their commitments are so rigid? Or what if the opportunity to go away on a retreat presents itself? Will the backlog of things on their “To Do” list prevent them from grabbing the chance? Feel free to use examples from your own life or those you’ve observed to talk about missed opportunities due to too-full schedules.

- You may also want to talk about how some student leaders feel valued proportional to how busy and needed they are. Does your student identify with his work and accomplishments more than he identifies with just being himself? You may only touch the tip of the iceberg with this topic, as delving into it deeper could benefit from the assistance of a trained counselor.

- Then, talk about what could be cut from your student’s schedule. Don’t make suggestions; let him do that. What activity is on the list that doesn’t feel totally worthwhile? Could he be a member of an organization instead of an officer? What are some ways to whittle the schedule into something that is manageable while still being satisfying?

These kinds of conversations can help students take their personal health and well-being into consideration a bit more. You can help your student see that you’re not judging her by the quantity of her involvements but by the quality of her commitment. Have some intentional conversations to let her know that it’s NOT a contest to see who can be the busiest and get the least sleep. A balanced life is much more worthwhile.

Signs That Your Student May be Overwhelmed

She is...

- Constantly feeling behind
- Worried about how others perceive her
- Feeling like she’s letting people down
- Not able to get a handle on her various commitments
- Paralyzed by multi-tasking
- Consistently disorganized
- Not as reliable as she used to be
- Frustrated with herself
- Burned out
- Tense to the point of anger and other intense emotions (crying, swearing, etc.)
- Scattered and unfocused

If you’re concerned that your student isn’t handling things well, help her break down the commitments in her life into more manageable chunks. Also, suggest that she talks things out with someone in the learning center or counseling center to help her get back on track. Being overwhelmed can be frightening and frustrating—she needs your encouragement and support.
Communicating with the College: Why, How and When?

WHY?

As a parent, you want the absolute best for your student, and because of this you probably struggle with when to intervene and when to steer clear of challenging situations that arise in his life. This struggle does not end when he goes to college, and recent research actually suggests parental involvement in a college student’s day-to-day activities is increasing. It has become so common that Neil Howe and William Strauss, authors of Millennials Go to College, have given this new parenting style a name—“helicopter parenting”—to signify “hovering” over a student’s life.

HOW?

How can you be a partner with the college in supporting your student’s personal growth and development without hovering? Below are some common college student experiences that parents can easily be pulled into, with suggestions on how to empower your student to handle each situation himself.

1. Roommate Conflict
   - Your son has complained to you for weeks that his roommate is messy, stays up late and interrupts his studying and sleep.
   - First, encourage him to talk with his roommate about his observations, concerns and possible solutions. You can even role-play this conversation with him to help him get comfortable.
   - If that doesn’t work, suggest he talk with his Resident Assistant to help mediate a roommate meeting or provide strategies for conflict resolution.
   - What Not to Do: Call the roommate’s parents, call the Director of Residence Life, or call the President of the College – more gets done when your student goes through the proper channels.

2. Grade Conflict
   - Your daughter feels that a professor is grading her unfairly.
   - First, help her identify why she believes the grading is unfair. Faculty members have open office hours, so encourage her to schedule a meeting after class or stop in to share her concerns with the professor.
   - If that doesn’t work, suggest she meet with her academic advisor to discuss the situation and see what other options are available to address her concern.
   - What Not to Do: Call the faculty member, call the Academic Dean, or call the Academic Advisor.

3. Minor Conduct Violation
   - Your student has been found guilty of a behavioral conduct violation.
   - First, breathe! Then discuss the violation, the choices made, and the consequences of his inappropriate behavior.
   - Second, advise and support him as he goes through the campus judicial process, and help him reflect on what he has learned from the experience, and how his behavior will change in the future.
   - What Not to Do: Call a lawyer, call the Dean of Students, or attend the judicial hearing.

WHEN?

There certainly are times that contacting the college directly is appropriate and necessary.

However, when possible, try to limit your contact with the college during times of crisis to seeking suggestions on how your daughter can further help herself. Challenging situations are a part of the learning process. When parents limit their involvement to suggestions and advice, students gain confidence, self-responsibility, and a skill-base that will last them a lifetime.

Times that contacting the college is the best course of action:
- Death of a family member
- Concern that student may harm self or others
- Alleged hazing or harassment
- If the college requests your involvement

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