

Coping with the first-year university jitters

FRANCES WILLICK EDUCATION REPORTER

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Coddled kids, over-protective parents can be in for a shock



Geoff Davies, a Masters of Journalism student at the University of King's College in Halifax, gives high-fives to first-year students as he leads them into the school on Tuesday. The students were wearing academic gowns as part of university tradition called matriculation. (RYAN TAPLIN / Staff)

The phenomenon of so-called “helicopter parenting” means some frosh students may face extra challenges as they set out on their own for the first time, says a Halifax psychologist.

The head of counselling and psychological services at Dalhousie University says the increased level of control and involvement that some parents have means their kids may not have the coping mechanisms needed to deal with the stresses of university life.

“Parents have managed their children’s lives to the extent that they haven’t let their children make mistakes,” said Joanne Mills. “And all of a sudden, they have this new-found independence and freedom and they screw up.”

“They don’t necessarily have the problem-solving skills in place to deal with the difficulties that they’re facing for the first time.”

Creating good friendships is one of the key ways that first-year students can mitigate the stress of life as a frosh, said Dalhousie psychology and neuroscience instructor Sean MacKinnon.

“Developing a good social support network and a sense of intimacy with other people is ... a well-known protective factor against psychological distress of various sorts,” said MacKinnon, who has conducted a study of first-year students’ transition to university. “So, when the going gets tough, having close friends that you can rely on through those tough times ... seems to protect students against a lot of this.”

MacKinnon said some of the stressors facing first-year students can involve a drop in grades from high school to university, leaving the support networks they had at home, trying to forge new friendships and dealing with new tasks such as laundry, cooking and paying bills.

“You see a lot of psychological distress ... like anger, shame, sadness, anxiety, all these sorts of things. You see that really spike around October, so mid-term time. So once all the excitement of orientation and all the newness wears off, now it’s just a lot of responsibility.”

First-year student Chrislyn Neil said she’s feeling a bit of trepidation as she starts a history degree at Saint Mary’s University this week.

“Now that I’ve gotten through the first two days, I’m much better. I was extremely nervous,” said Neil, who lives in Cole Harbour. “I come from a kind of smallish community. I’ve had the same core group of friends since I started junior high and none of them are going here. But now I feel a lot better because everyone’s like, ‘We don’t know anyone either.’”

Momen Metwalli, who is beginning his studies at Saint Mary’s, said the social and academic aspects of university life are his biggest worries.

“It’s kind of difficult, approaching people. It’s kind of scary at first; you’re talking to somebody you don’t know,” said Metwalli, who grew up in Halifax but has since spent years living in Dubai and Toronto.

“My main concerns, really, are being able to cope with my classes. Maybe it’s a little tougher here compared to other places and maybe you have to abide by certain rules that are different from other places.”

Mills said there are many options available to students who need help coping with concerns. Most universities have psychological counselling, academic advisers, residence assistants, peer mentors, and, of course, faculty members to help with academic questions.

But students shouldn't wait until a crisis to seek assistance.

"A lot of times people endure it by themselves and then it reaches a peak point, which is harder," Mills said. "So my advice is to seek out those supports and services early in the process preventatively so that it doesn't reach a crisis stage."

Students aren't the only ones affected by back-to-school stress. Mills said technology makes communication between students and their parents easier, but it can be a bit of a double-edged sword for parents.

"When I was a university student, I was only allowed to call once a week because long-distance phone calls were expensive. And it had to be Sunday night because Sunday night was half-price," Mills said. "Whereas nowadays, students are texting their parents constantly throughout the day, so the communication channel is tighter."

"Years ago, young people transitioned to university, underwent stress, underwent homesickness, underwent all those difficulties, but the parents didn't necessarily know about it, and we survived. Whereas nowadays, the parent is hearing every detail of it."

Mills has led back-to-school orientation workshops for parents for many years, and said parents often express concern about how their child will manage their new-found independence.

"How are they going to do managing that freedom? Are they going to eat healthy? Are they going to eat regularly? Are they going to resist the urge to try drugs? Are they going to stay up late and be a wreck the next day? Are they going to skip all their classes? And that's probably a very realistic worry," she said.

Her advice? Have faith in their parenting skills and expect some missteps along the way.

"The biggest piece of advice I can give to parents is to trust that they've done their job. Trust that, at the end of the day, they're not going to break. ... You've instilled in them their abilities to cope and to make decisions and to manage independence and freedom and it doesn't mean it's going to be perfect."

"What I try to tell parents is, just be prepared for them to make mistakes. Mistakes are part of the process. We need to learn from mistakes and move on. But if you don't let them make mistakes, then they don't learn from it."

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