

By Melissa Erickson

More Content Now

Transitioning into adulthood and taking the plunge into college life can be stressful, especially for kids who feel pressure to succeed.

For many kids, pressure to succeed is all they know, said Denise Pope, co-founder of Challenge Success and senior lecturer at Stanford University.

“From a young age they’ve been programmed to achieve, to get good grades, to get into a good college,” Pope said. “Settling in at college, many students think, ‘Now, I can have a life.’ Instead, they’re on the same track: ‘I have to do well now to get to the next step.’ It never stops. They feel they need to get good grades to get into grad school or to get an internship or good job.”

Good and bad stress

College students are more stressed out than ever, according to research from the Association for University and College Counseling Center Directors. Anxiety continues to be the most predominant and increasing concern among college students (50.6 percent), followed by depression (41.2 percent), relationship concerns (34.4 percent), suicidal ideation (20.5 percent), self-injury (14.2 percent) and alcohol abuse (9.5 percent).

“When you are put in a situation where you are learning new things, it’s natural to feel overwhelmed and maybe even insecure, but that’s the sign that you’re in the right place and learning,” said Nancy Darling, a professor of psychology at Oberlin



PRESSURE to Succeed

Dealing with college stress

College. “It is when we are in that sweet spot where we aren’t sure of ourselves that we’re learning.”

Challenging college classes can be both exciting and discomforting for students, Darling said. While small children fail and often happily keep trying to learn new skills, college students often become frustrated or angry if they don’t immediately understand new material or get good grades on exams, Darling said.

Stress can be both a good and bad thing. Eustress is the so-called good stress that can help motivate and excite a person. Bad stress is distress, and if you

constantly feel like you’re in a state of fight or flight it can lead to both mental and physical health problems, Pope said.

“At Stanford we talk about the yellow duck syndrome,” she said: Think of a rubber duck with a painted-on smile. From outward appearances, everything looks fine, but below the surface, that duck is paddling like mad.

“There’s a stigma that’s associated with mental health” that stops some college students from seeking help when they needed it, Pope said.

“If you’re feeling stressed and you don’t have the resources to deal with it, get

help. You can’t will yourself out of a depression. Every school has some kind of a health center,” she said. Many students don’t know that counseling services are often free, at least for the triage period or for the first 10 sessions.

Peers, friends and roommates need to be watchful for signs of stress: crying all the time, not getting out of bed or change in affect, dress or friend group, Pope said. If you’re worried about a friend, say something and advise them to talk with someone or get help.

Make a plan

Before school starts, parents and teens should come up with a communication plan. While kids may text home multiple times a day, it’s difficult to “get a read” on how a child is doing because text doesn’t offer tone, Pope said. Try to schedule a phone call or video chat to get your eyes on them.

Remember, kids may be calling just to vent not to have you solve their problems.

“Listen and be supportive,” Pope said.

Also, don’t expect the same grades as high school.

“They’re in a very challenging academic environment,” Pope said.

Be sure to teach your child positive coping strategies for what they can do when they hit the wall.

“Exercise. Go for a run. Take a break. Get coffee with a friend. Do yoga, meditate or mindfulness. If they don’t have a positive coping strategy that’s when they may turn to alcohol, drugs or other negative behaviors,” Pope said.



“If you’re feeling stressed and you don’t have the resources to deal with it, get help.”

Denise Pope,
Stanford
University