

For immediate release

October 2008

Worried about your child away at college? Tips for parents

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Spooner, Wis.--The semester is in full swing and you're concerned that your child away at college might be struggling with school work, not getting enough sleep or engaging in some risky behaviors.

As a parent, what can you do to help your student avoid problems when they're away from home?

Annette Bjorklund, UW-Extension 4-H youth development educator in Washburn County suggests that parents discuss how to deal with the stresses of school before their child even leaves for college. "Talk with your child about how they have responded to stress in the past both physically and emotionally. Emphasize that at school, your student will be responsible for the choices made—both positive or negative."

Bjorklund says parents can remind their student to cope with stress by taking a break--exercising, going for a walk, meditating, seeing a movie, working on a hobby or even just taking a nap.

Sleep—how much or how little—is a factor that plays a significant role in how well your child does in school.

"As parents, you won't have any control over how much sleep your student gets while they're at college, but encouraging adequate sleep while they're still at home can set them up for good habits when they're on their own," says Bjorklund. "Help them understand how sleep affects their attitude, mood and academic success."

For example, research has shown that poor sleep quality can lead to anxiety, depression, reduced physical health, poor problem-solving ability, difficulty paying attention and increased use of drugs and alcohol.

If you're concerned that your child isn't getting enough sleep at school, talk with them about it. Ask them how many hours they sleep or if they've noticed that not getting enough sleep is affecting their mood or ability to complete tasks.

Encourage your child to be safe by staying with others when they're out late on campus. Many schools have escort services that make sure students arrive home safely. Remind your child to avoid poorly lighted areas and to walk or jog with another person when it's dark.

Unfortunately, some students do turn to unhealthy behaviors while they're at college. Using drugs, eating too much or too little, alcohol, sex, self-mutilation or "checking out" by becoming too isolated occur on campuses across the country.

Eating disorders such as anorexia, binge eating or bulimia affect anywhere from two to five percent of college-age students. "We're even seeing something called 'drunkorexia,' where young women don't eat anything all day and 'spend their calories' on drinking at night. With no food in their systems, these students get drunker faster, putting both their health and their personal safety at risk," says Bjorklund.

What signs should a parent look for if they suspect their child is having trouble at school?

Bjorklund offers some clues to watch for:

- A striking change in behavior or attitude. For example, your student is in touch regularly and suddenly stops communicating.
- Anxiety, unwillingness to talk, moodiness.
- Irritability.
- Inability to sleep.
- Sudden weight loss or weight gain.
- Negative attitude.

"All of these could be signs that something's not right," she says.

Bjorklund encourages parents to take action if they suspect there is a problem. "First, be attentive to the signs or changes in your student's behavior," she says.

- Find out what resources are available on campus via web sites or calls to the residence hall or advisors.
- Ask friends or roommates if they've observed changes in your child.
- Reach out to campus health services. They have experience dealing with situations similar to what your child is going through. Enlist their aid and advice.
- Keep the lines of communication open with your child.

Bjorklund and her UW-Extension colleagues recently developed an educational program on CD and DVD titled "Are You Ready? The College Transition," available from the UW-Extension Learning Store at <http://learningstore.uwex.edu/Are-You-Ready-The-College-Transition-P1277C255.aspx> The program is designed for educators who work with high school seniors in school or other organizational settings, but may also be of interest to parents.

For more information on helping families and students make the transition to college, contact your local county Extension office.

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