

Multiple Priorities: Balancing Self, Family, and School

Stress can be overwhelming for the student trying to balance self, family, and school. The choice is to pursue your degree may be a good one in long term, but in the short term it may take a toll if you are not prepared to deal with the process adequately. How can students with multiple responsibilities succeed when they add the role of student? They must learn to cope effectively with the challenge of balancing conflicting demands that pull them in different directions. There are five major pitfalls to confront:

I MUST DO IT ALL WELL

It is difficult but necessary for those who need to be the “super student” to set realistic expectations for themselves. It might not be realistic to get A’s in every class or develop all your skills to the maximum levels given the amount of time and energy available. This could well be the first time in your life that you feel like you are not working up to your full potential. Learning to adjust expectations based on what is possible and still give your attention to the other aspects of your lives is a challenging task, but not impossible!

I MUST EXPERIENCE IT ALL NOW

There are so many opportunities to take advantage of in college that it often is hard to choose among them. The chance to study new, intriguing areas, to excel in school, and to achieve your goals is wonderful, but some limitations are often needed based on the constraints of maintaining relationships, working, going to school, and taking care of yourself.

I CANNOT SAY NO

The ability to say no to requests or opportunities is difficult for many people. College has so many demands that it is sometimes necessary to set limits. Saying no to fellow students or professors can be difficult because of what you believe they will think about you, or because of the guilt feelings that follow from denying someone’s request. Being able to say no to requests from friends and family also becomes important in order to avoid becoming overwhelmed so that it is impossible to cope with yourself. Saying no has consequences; opportunities may be missed or someone may be unhappy with your choices. But not being able to say no leads to mental and physical exhaustion that can develop into serious stress-induced illnesses.

I FEEL SO GUILTY

There are so many times in the effort to balance self, family, and school that you may start to feel guilty as a student. Unfortunately, guilt uses up vital energy, does not change the situation, and usually involves some self-deprecation and blame. The irony is that this is one of the most important times in your life to be forgiving with yourself, which guilt will not allow. Learn how to nurture yourself so that you can feel re-energized instead of drained. Do not give all of your healthier habits a lower priority.

LIVING IN THE FUTURE

When life becomes very stressful, people sometimes cope by thinking of a time in the future when stress will be less. Unfortunately, many people take this reasonable idea and develop an unhealthy habit of living in the future. They are waiting for happiness in their life at some point and this reduces the enjoyment of the present. Be present in your life! Find moments of joy and pleasure to help you through moments of stress and challenge.

You have chosen to attend college. Be accepting of the disruptions this decision will create in your life. How you cope with these issues will determine how much you will be able to enjoy the process and the accomplishment of your goal. Keeping perspective on what is real and important is helpful in evaluating necessary choices that need to be made regarding where to put your time and energy. One key to developing and keeping a healthy perspective is being able to slow down and enjoy the process. Keep in mind that college is a temporary process to a permanent life. The long-term benefits outweigh the short-term sacrifices. Proceed through your days in college with a positive attitude that you can do it all...just not at the same time.