

Home for the Holidays:
A Survival Guide for College Students and Parents
by Mark J. Forest, Ph.D.

AVP for Student Affairs – Health & Wellness / Director, Mental Health Services

Heading home for Thanksgiving or winter break can be both exciting and confusing for students and their parents. For students, the excitement comes from anticipating a needed break from the stressful pace of college life, getting some good home cooking, being able to re-connect with friends, and even being able to sleep in their old, familiar beds. For parents, having their children back at home, even with their idiosyncratic habits and captivating qualities, can feel like things are finally back to normal. Parents sometimes imagine that the student who left for college just a few months ago will be the exact same person who returns for the holidays. Often this isn't the case, and it is common for the most noticeable personal growth to take place during the first year or so of college. As a parent, it is important to be patient and understanding of this time of growth. It is also important to still be the parent in the relationship and in the household.

The confusing part often stems from adjusting to the different standards regarding issues of accountability and structure that college life and home life require. For students who have been exposed to a newly found sense of personal freedom and blossoming independence that often occurs at college, coming back home to an environment that provides more structure, curfews and family responsibilities can be challenging. For parents, these changes can feel disruptive, and perhaps even disrespectful. A conversation about the students' experiences while away at college, along with reminders from parents about expectations while at home, can often prevent these challenges from escalating into unwanted conflict.

Here are some general tips for keeping the peace over the holiday/winter break:

1. **Be flexible** – Students have just completed a long semester and the pressures of final exams, often with little sleep. They will likely be viewing their time off as a time for rest, relaxation and a reprieve from obligations.
2. **Communicate your expectations** – Talk to each other about what you expect from each other and from the visit home. While it is not unreasonable to expect your child to participate in family activities, understand that they have become used to a more independent lifestyle while away from home. Communication is key.
3. **Be open-minded** – College students are often exposed to new knowledge and ideas by professors and friends. When your child expresses some new ideas, perhaps contrary to your own, don't react. Instead use it as an opportunity for family discussion and re-acquainting yourself with your child.

Signs to watch out for:

College can be a stressful place at times. This is especially true for transitions into and out of college which require students to draw upon new internal resources. The academic pressures can be intense. The social and interpersonal demands and challenges can leave one feeling frustrated and at times

isolated. While many students take some time to adjust to these experiences and feel the normal ups and downs of college life, for some students the demands and challenges can be overwhelming and lead to feelings of depression. We find that students who have a prior history of anxiety and/or depression may be particularly vulnerable to the demands and challenges of adjusting to life at college.

Understanding the signs, symptoms, causes and treatment of depression is the first step to overcoming the problem. Here are some things to watch out for.

While depression varies from person to person, there are some common signs and symptoms that often manifest when a student is depressed. It's important to keep in mind that these symptoms can be part of life's normal lows. But the more symptoms you have, the stronger they are, and the longer they've lasted – the more likely it is that you are dealing with clinical depression. When these symptoms appear to be overwhelming and disabling to a student's basic functioning, that is when it is time to seek help.

Signs and symptoms of depression include:

- **Feelings of helplessness and hopelessness.** A bleak outlook—nothing will ever get better and there's nothing you can do to improve your situation.
- **Loss of interest in daily activities.** No interest in former hobbies, pastimes, social activities, or sex. You've lost your ability to feel joy and pleasure.
- **Appetite or weight changes.** Significant weight loss or weight gain—a change of more than 5% of body weight in a month.
- **Sleep changes.** Either insomnia, especially waking in the early hours of the morning, or oversleeping (also known as hypersomnia).
- **Anger or irritability.** Feeling agitated, restless, or even violent. Your tolerance level is low, your temper short, and everything and everyone gets on your nerves.
- **Loss of energy.** Feeling fatigued, sluggish, and physically drained. Your whole body may feel heavy, and even small tasks are exhausting or take longer to complete.
- **Self-loathing.** Strong feelings of worthlessness or guilt. You harshly criticize yourself for perceived faults and mistakes.
- **Reckless behavior.** You engage in escapist behavior such as substance abuse, compulsive gambling, reckless driving, or dangerous sports.
- **Concentration problems.** Trouble focusing, making decisions, or remembering things.
- **Unexplained aches and pains.** An increase in physical complaints such as headaches, back pain, aching muscles, and stomach pain

Depression in young adults:

While some young adults appear sad when depressed, others do not. In fact, irritability – rather than depression – is frequently the predominant symptom in depressed young adults, especially males. A depressed young adult may be hostile, grumpy, or easily lose his or her temper. Unexplained aches and pains are also common symptoms of depression in young people. Left untreated, young adult depression can lead to problems at home and college, drug abuse, self-loathing – even suicide. But with help, young adult depression is highly treatable.

Just as the symptoms and causes of depression are different in different people, so are the ways to feel better. What works for one person might not work for another, and no one treatment is appropriate in

all cases. If you recognize the signs of depression in your child, take some time to explore the many treatment options. In most cases, the best approach involves a combination of social support, lifestyle changes, emotional skills building and professional help.

Make healthy lifestyle changes:

Changes in one's lifestyle are not always easy, but can make a big impact on depression. Here are some changes that can be very effective:

- Cultivating supportive relationships (family and friends): <http://www.helpguide.org/articles/relationships/how-to-make-friends.htm>
- Getting regular exercise and sleep
- Eating healthfully to naturally boost mood and energy
- Manage stress: <http://www.helpguide.org/articles/stress/stress-management.htm>
- Practice relaxation techniques: <http://www.helpguide.org/articles/stress/relaxation-techniques-for-stress-relief.htm>
- Challenge negative thought patterns

If support from family and friends, positive lifestyle changes, and emotional skills building aren't enough, consider seeking help from a mental health professional: <http://www.helpguide.org/articles/emotional-health/finding-a-therapist-who-can-help-you-heal.htm>

While at home over break:

- Contact a local community mental health provider through your insurance company. Most plans these days have an online provider database of mental health providers who will accept your insurance. Family physicians are also frequently aware of community mental health providers they have used.
- For imminent concerns about health and well-being or emergencies, call 911 or bring your child to the emergency room at your local hospital.

When back at college (TCNJ):

- **Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS)** – offers group counseling, brief individual counseling, urgent appointments and referral services to undergraduate and graduate students free of charge. Students already connected to a mental health provider from home are encouraged to maintain that relationship while attending TCNJ if possible.
 - Location: Eickhoff Hall 107
 - Phone: (609) 771-2247
- **Center for Integrative Wellness (formerly the TCNJ Clinic)** – a community based training clinic offering counseling services to students and residents in surrounding communities with no geographic restriction. Low fee for students.
 - Location: Forcina Hall 124
 - Phone: (609) 771-2091
- **Community Counseling Collaborative** - a new Health and Wellness initiative at TCNJ to bring licensed mental health providers on campus to provide low-cost, longer-term mental health care to our students. Offices are located on the 4th floor of Forcina Hall, Suite 413-415. The CCC

program started offering services to students in mid-December of 2017 and is currently still in development. Access to services at the CCC can be coordinated through CAPS and the Dean of Students Office – but clinicians can also be contacted directly for appointment availability.

- Location: Forcina Hall, Rooms 413-415
- <https://caps.tcnj.edu/counseling-services/community-counseling-collaborative/>
- **Hotlines:**
 - NJ Hopeline (24/7): 1-855-654-3735
 - National Suicide Prevention Lifeline (24/7): 1-800-273-TALK (8255)
 - LGBTQ – Trevor Lifeline (24/7): 1-866-488-7386

More information on depression:

- [Parent's Guide to Teen Depression:](#) Learn the Signs and How You Can Help Your Teen
- [Teenager's Guide to Depression:](#) Learn Tips and Tools for Helping Yourself or a Friend
- [Depression in Men:](#) Why It's Hard to Recognize and What Helps
- [Depression in Women:](#) Causes, Symptoms, Treatment, and Self-Help
- [Dealing with Depression:](#) Self-Help and Coping Tips to Overcome Depression
- [Helping a Depressed Person:](#) How to Reach Out and Help Someone While Taking Care Self
- [Bipolar Disorder Signs and Symptoms:](#) Recognizing Mania, Hypomania and Bipolar Depression
- [Antidepressant Medication:](#) What You Need to Know About Medications for Depression
- [Depression Treatment:](#) Therapy, Medication, and Lifestyle Changes That Can Help Depression

It is also important to keep in mind that while there are a few students who will develop a form of depression that requires mental health treatment, the majority of students will not – but instead will adjust well to the inherent stress and often challenging role of being a college student in the 21st century.

Best wishes for a safe, relaxing and healthy winter break.