

FACTS *for* FAMILIES

No. 115

June 2014

Starting College with a Psychiatric Illness

Leaving home to attend college is an exciting time for both students and parents. Many students with psychiatric diagnoses attend college successfully. However, additional planning may be required to ensure a smooth transition.

Students will be responsible for managing their mental health care while in college. Know ahead of time how and where to access mental health services, whether on campus at the student health/wellness center, at a separate student counseling center, or off-campus in the community. In order to help with the transition, parents may need to help them practice managing their care ahead of time so they are prepared to do this on their own.

Students will be expected to:

- Make and keep appointments
- Report their treatment history to new healthcare providers
- Sign consent for treatment and other forms
- Report concerns if symptoms change
- Take medications and refill prescriptions
- Register with the disability office if accommodations are needed

Two federal privacy laws apply to college students: the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) and the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA). Students must give written permission for health and education information to be shared with their parents or anyone else except under certain emergency circumstances. Parents can share information with school personnel if they have a concern about their student, but they may not receive information unless their child has given permission.

The Americans with Disabilities Act (1990) and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 allow students to receive support and accommodations for disabilities. These accommodations are managed through each campus's Office of Disability Services. The name of this office may be different at different colleges.

Here are some practical tips for college-bound students and families to promote well-being during this transition:

- Try not to make any big changes in mental health treatment before heading off to college. Keep medications and frequency of visits, including therapy, the same.

Adjustments in medications should only be done under the care of a medical provider.

- Create a health summary of past and present treatments including medications. Have copies available for each new provider.
- Help home and college treatment providers coordinate care. This is particularly important for breaks, holidays, emergencies, and complicated situations.
- Register for accommodations with the college's disability office if the student has used them in the past.
- Develop a support network. Academic advisors, deans, student affairs staff, faculty, and dormitory resident assistants are available to provide support.

While starting college can be exciting, it can also be difficult. Common challenges may include: roommate difficulties, homesickness, struggles with time management, easier access to alcohol and drugs, and increased freedom.

The following are some strategies to help the transition to college:

- Make sure to get enough sleep. Poor sleep habits and not getting enough sleep can worsen psychiatric conditions. Learn ways to develop healthy sleeping habits (also called sleep hygiene).
- Look into the college's Health and Wellness Center. There are many resources on campus for students with special needs and interests.
- Consider whether to request a single room (if available) or a roommate. Living in close quarters while coping with a psychiatric problem may require extra planning. A single room offers more privacy, but it can limit socialization.
- "Partying" may occur. Speak honestly with your doctor how substance use will affect your condition and medications.
- Dormitory resident advisors (RAs) can be a support when stressful events occur.
- Seek additional help if a friend or roommate has difficulties such as substance use, suicide, and sexual assault.

Successfully transitioning to college with a psychiatric illness is possible with planning and preparation. Establish a plan for regular family communication. If you feel that your teen has worsening problems after they leave for college encourage them to seek further help from a trained and qualified mental health professional.

For additional information, see *Facts for Families*:

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[#22 Normality](#)

[#42 The Continuum of Care](#)

[#47 The Anxious Child](#)

[#57, #58 Normal Adolescent Development](#)

[#66 Helping Teenagers with Stress](#)

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[#114 Transitioning From High School to College with a Psychiatric Illness: Preparation](#)

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