

How to help your college student cope with loneliness, without hovering

By Joanna Nesbit September 22, 2016

When Sarah Lanners moved to George Washington University in Washington, D.C., from her California home, she didn't know anyone. She connected with her roommates right away, and she appreciated how open everyone was in the early days, willing to talk, befriend people and hang out together. But over time, as acquaintances and dorm-mates settled into friendships, loneliness and homesickness took hold of her. "Returning to school after winter break was rough," she recalls.

Now a senior, Lanners can identify contributing factors to her loneliness as a freshman. For starters, she wasn't busy enough, and she recommends that new students pick something — a club, activity or volunteer opportunity — to devote time to. Also, she's shy, and it wasn't easy to put herself out there to meet people. She wishes now she had been more proactive earlier, initiating study sessions and lunch dates. By the end of freshman year, things got better. The turning points included spearheading a chapter of an organization that she really cared about, and getting a part-time job.

Loneliness is part of the transition to college for just about everyone, but it's not an easy experience to weather, and many students feel uncomfortable sharing their feelings. It also can get mixed in with homesickness, [anxiety](#), [a false sense of inadequacy](#) and depression.

To combat garden-variety loneliness, campus experts agree with Lanners. They say the best solution is to get involved. Finding a club or activity that fits your interests and connects you with like-minded people is key, says David Spano, associate vice chancellor for Health Programs and Services and director of the counseling center at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte. Sometimes students want to get on top of academics first, he says, but getting involved right away helps them do better academically as a result of those social interactions.

Students also benefit from knowing others are having a hard time, too, no matter how happy they look on Instagram or strolling around campus. The trouble is nobody wants to show they're struggling, says Philip Burns, a licensed mental health counselor at Western Washington University in Bellingham. "They think they'll stand out, but students who can own how lonely they are end up connecting with people," he says. "It brings you closer to people when you can admit things aren't all good, when you can show some vulnerability."

Experts agree technology has made it more difficult for some students to adjust to college. Social media is useful for making plans when students have good connections in place, but it can amplify loneliness if they don't, says Greg Eells, director of counseling and psychological services at Cornell University. Retreating into gaming or Netflix binges further hinders attempts to connect face to face.

Rosy expectations also complicate the transition. "Every year we see students who are shocked that they feel overwhelmed by emotions. The vision they had for their college career feels different from what they're experiencing," says Rebecca MacNair-Semands, senior associate director of UNC-Charlotte's counseling center.

Colleges are prepared to help, offering services such as one-on-one therapy, group sessions, and workshop-style presentations on mindfulness, coping skills, first-generation status and more. Group sessions help normalize students' experiences and facilitate connections with others, and may prevent emotional setbacks from worsening. Loneliness by itself isn't a mental health condition, but other conditions, such as social anxiety, can be a contributing factor. Socially anxious students have a harder time initiating conversations or worry they don't have the skills to maintain a friendship, MacNair-Semands says. UNC-Charlotte offers a social confidence group that provides support and guidance for managing social situations.

Burns emphasizes that feeling lonely is normal and okay. Moreover, it's a sign students come from good relationships at home, he tells them, and they have the capacity to build new ones. Using mindfulness techniques, he helps them identify their emotions and "sit with," or fully experience, them. "We can bear our experience much more than we think we can. No one feels good all the time," Burns says.

Other counselors concur that sitting with emotions is important. "So much of why people struggle and why mental health concerns get worse is people try to control emotional experiences they can't control — they push away feeling sad or anxious, for example," Eells says. Often, new students worry they shouldn't be alone, equating it with being lonely. But spending time alone can be an incredible opportunity for introspection and reflection, he says, and he encourages students to rethink their notion of being alone.

That's not to say students shouldn't reach out for help, and they don't have to be in the midst of a crisis to take advantage of services. Information around campuses abounds, and student affairs offices and residential programs also provide resources as students are moving in. New York's Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, for example, offers an orientation program, "Navigating Rensselaer and Beyond," to help students transition and get connected to other students right away, says Keith Anderson, staff psychologist and outreach coordinator at the school.

How can parents help? You may feel blue about your empty nest, but communicating excessively with your student isn't necessarily in their best interest, and it can hinder their adjustment. College experts suggest following your child's lead. If students call home because they're homesick and lonely, listen, be supportive and then direct them back toward campus resources.

"You don't want to be the number one person they're going to at an age where they're normally connecting with peers and learning who they are through interacting with peers," MacNair-Semands says.

Barbara Greenberg, a teen clinical psychologist and author of “[Teenage as a Second Language: A Parent’s Guide to Becoming Bilingual](#),” says she’s noticed increasing parental separation anxiety over the past 10 years. As students are adjusting, she says, it’s important and appropriate to support them, but it’s equally important not to solve their problems for them.

Above all, students should know that making lasting friendships takes time. They’ve just left 18 years of a family cocoon, and it would be strange if they *didn’t* feel lonely.

“You’re going to have those nights where your roommates are out, you feel like you don’t have anyone, and people don’t know you yet,” Lanners says. “But hundreds of others feel exactly the same way.”

Joanna Nesbit remembers college loneliness well, even back in 1982. She writes about education, parenting, personal finance and family travel. Find her work at joannanesbit.com or follow her on Twitter at [@joannanesbit](https://twitter.com/joannanesbit).

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