

Suddenly Semestered: Food & Weight Concerns on Campus

Colleen Conroy, MSW RSW

University and college students are at a vulnerable stage in their lives. Post secondary education tends to coincide with the time of identity consolidation. Who am I? Who do I want to become? How do I present myself? These are the questions that can plague adolescents and young adults. The struggle to set limits and personal boundaries around the increase in freedom, choices, and opportunities that campus life brings can be incredibly stressful.

For many people, post secondary education involves leaving home, making new friends, adjusting to a new city, and many other unexpected changes. In addition to this, these students experience high expectations from their parents and greater competition in classes from their peers.

Facing new experiences

As a counsellor on a university campus, it appears that eating disorders and issues with food and weight preoccupation continue to be on the rise. When entering university students experience many different feelings; some may feel excited about finally being able to start studying towards the career of their choice and feel hopeful about the future. Others may experience anxiety and may not feel ready to leave home. The thought of being on their own and having to be independent can be very frightening for some. They may fear they will not be accepted or fit in. Some may not even want to be there. They may feel pressured into going to university by their parents. So although university can be a wonderful experience for many people, for some it can be one of the worst.

It is important to realize that it takes time to adjust to university life. Students leave behind the aspect of their lives that are most familiar to them: their families, friends, community, home, their own room, and the many belongings that may have helped them to feel secure. Unfortunately, some students bring with them their eating disorders.

The university environment can be a ripe ground for eating disorders to develop or to become exacerbated. On top of the already listed issues, students typically experience pressure to maintain a certain grade point average; pressure of holding down a job while studying; the stresses of adapting to family life as a young adult in university, or needing to adapt to roommates for the first time; and possibly a poor self image. These pressures combine to create emotional and psychological stress such that students feel they are

losing control of their lives. Some students may seek to regain control by adopting unhealthy coping mechanisms such as dieting or restricting calories. Food and weight management and rituals may give them the illusion of being in control of this transition. Engaging in eating disorder behaviours becomes the way in which a student can gauge their success and progress in this transition. Losing weight or building muscle is something tangible they can seemingly control, regulate and have success with. In reality, these activities indicate how out of control this transition has become for the individual, as they focus on food and weight management practices rather than on the underlying concerns.

Facing food and weight issues

‘FROSH 15’ or ‘first year spread’, referring to weight gain due to changes in lifestyle and eating habits, is a phenomenon that most students, especially the women, have heard stories about. While few welcome it, young women and men with a heightened sensitivity to weight and shape issues dread this phenomenon. For some students, this will be their first introduction to believing they need to diet. For most, this will be their first opportunity to look after their own nutritional needs. Students living in close quarters may begin to compare their eating and exercising habits. Unfortunately, these comparisons can lead to competition, obsessions and unhealthy behaviors.

Some students come to campus with disordered eating and food and weight preoccupation while others will develop their first symptoms here. Students may suddenly be faced for the first time with having full responsibility for shopping, food preparation and planning, and for what and when they eat. Unhealthy eating patterns and poor nutritional choices may lead to weight gain, which the student may compensate for by going on diets. This cycle can trigger eating problems, bring back dormant eating issues or create an opportunity for these students to measure success and define themselves through their relationships with food, exercise, and/or body image.

A university campus can be an appearance-conscious place. For some students this makes it harder to accept their perceived imperfections. This can lead to strict control around food, weight and exercise. If the number of people running around an athletic complex at all hours and those who pack the athletic complex from 6 in the morning until 12 at night are any indication, exercise is a strong focus for many at the university. Exercise is healthy and generally should be encouraged. But the campus athletic facility is a place where it is easy to hide or justify excessive exercising, often used to mask problems or negative emotions and to manage weight and shape, because it is something that most individuals on campus appear to do.

Although issues with food and weight negatively affect many people on a campus, the incidence of these coping strategies are higher in some fields of academic study. Research at several universities has found that students in some programs, such as dance,

theater, nursing, nutrition and physical education are at a greater risk for eating disorders. Students involved in cheerleading and athletics also tend to have an above average rate of eating disorders. The reasons most often cited in these studies are the emphasis on meeting weight requirements and/or certain body type and general appearance, and the rigorous academic expectations by both the student and faculty. This can place tremendous pressure on the students to conform to expectations that can be unreasonable or harmful to them.

General transition tips for the student

Below are some observations and tips to keep in mind during this transition:

1. The first few weeks on campus can be a lonely period. You may have concerns about forming friendships. When you look around, it may seem that everyone else is self-confident and socially successful. The reality is that everyone has similar concerns. Meaningful, new relationships don't develop over-night. It takes a good deal of time to build intimacy and trust in new friendships.

Try to reach out to past friends for interim support and not to turn to food for comfort. Maintaining your connections to your old friends will help you to feel socially connected and understood. Invite others to join you for meals, as this will help you to make friends at the same time as avoiding engaging in isolating behaviors around food and weight, which are unhealthy distractions from emotional concerns. Many first year programs and groups are being developed on campus to help address these lonely transitions: watch campus newsletters for information on clubs and groups that would interest you and provide the opportunity to meet like-minded individuals.

2. Not knowing what to expect and how to navigate the university system can increase your anxiety and self-doubt. Try building support and community instead of turning to excessive exercise and restrictive or comfort eating as a distraction.

Campuses typically have peer support programs and mentoring programs to help ease the transition to campus. Again, check in the campus newsletters to see what is available and join organized tours of the campus and facilities to feel more comfortable in your new environment, and to meet others in the same position.

If you allow sufficient time and reach out, you will likely find peers in the university who can provide structure and valuable support systems in this new environment.

3. Increased personal freedom can be both wonderful and frightening. Enjoy your freedom but practice setting limits on areas other than weight, food intake and exercise.

Establish and keep reasonable limits and expectations around homework. Be flexible with regard to both work and social engagements, but keep them in balance. Learn to assert

yourself and your needs constructively in both academic and social situations.

4. Living with roommates can present special and sometimes intense problems. Negotiating respect of personal property, personal space, sleep and relaxation needs can be a complex task. It is unrealistic to expect that roommates will be best friends. Roommates may work out mutually satisfying living arrangements, but each may tend to have their own circle of friends.

Find mutually agreeable times to discuss living arrangements. Communicate your legitimate needs calmly, while respecting cultural differences and practices and be willing to compromise to meet each other's important needs and to promote harmony in your new home. Establish basic house rules together, and respect them. Understand the limits of the relationship with your roommate/s and find more appropriate people to meet your other needs.

5. University classes are a great deal larger and more difficult than high-school classes. This can feel intimidating.

Get to know your classmates. Chat before or after class and invite people you think that you might like to know better to a movie or coffee – it doesn't commit you to anything more.

Attend learning and study skills seminars and get connected with students support services on campus.

6. Many students struggle with personal issues which surface during the school year. These may relate to school-specific issues, or to previous or current issues with regard to sexuality, ability, ethno-racial or other concerns, including abuse and trauma issues.

Reach out for help. You don't have to deal with this alone. Check out the confidential counselling services available on campus. If you are struggling with personal issues, you may want to consider lightening your academic load while you deal with them. It is easier to adjust your schedule before you have any academic slips than after, and avoids setting you up for additional feelings of incompetence or low self-esteem.

Adapting to this 'semestered' life will be full of transitions along the way. Don't be alone with this transition. Reach out for support. Whether you speak with your 'Don' or 'floor assistant' in residence or your roommate, do not expect yourself to make this transition perfectly. Make sure you keep things in perspective and remember that everybody struggles with transitions.

* Eating Disorders" Brochure by American College Health Association, 1300 Piccard Drive, Suite 20850, Rockville, MD 20850

Campus supports for those struggling with issues of food and weight

If you have issues related to food preoccupation, excessive exercise, and/or body image you may want to connect with some of the supports typically available. Almost all universities have health centres and counselling centres where you could access the help of most of the following professionals.

Counselling centres:

Counsellors: For counselling, case management (which means being a main contact person on a treatment team or making the referrals on and off campus) academic advising, career questions, relationship and roommate issues, self-esteem, concentration and navigating the campus successfully. Often educational groups are offered dealing with eating disorders and body image.

Psychologists: for counselling, body image, stress, anxiety, maladaptive behaviors regarding food and exercise, depression and worries about relationships.

Health services:

Physicians and Nurse Practitioners: For medical evaluations, irregular menses, bone health, anemia, mood and referrals to other resources.

Psychiatrists: for counselling, including on bingeing, obsessive thoughts, sleep problems, depression, and medication management.

Nutritionists: for advice on developing a healthy campus eating plan, achieving/maintaining a healthy weight and controlling chaotic eating, purging and over-exercise.

Learning Strategists: For help with studying efficiently and effectively, for being academically prepared for university life, and for concentration issues.

Disability Centres: Support with academic accommodations and advocacy on mental health issues, physical issues and learning disabilities. Often treatment bursaries for off-campus resources are available.

© NEDIC 2003 www.nedic.ca