

What I Know for Sure about Anxiety and College – Reflections from a College Counselor*

- It's really important to keep a fairly **regular sleep** schedule – one of the worst things you can do for anxiety/mood issues is to stay up really late and sleep in late, or to get up early some days and really late other days (the best thing for your mood is to have a regular sleep schedule where you get at least 7 hours of sleep, and are up by 9; the hardest thing for your mood is to go to sleep around 3-4am and get up 1-2pm, or to radically change your sleep schedule from day to day).

- Exercise** is the single best thing (other than sleep) that you can do to help alleviate and prevent anxiety and stress building up (even 3 times a week of 45 minutes of rhythmic exercise will help a lot, or a long brisk walk most days).

- Yoga** is super helpful, even a few short calming poses before bed (free yoga classes are available at Augsburg through the Student Mindfulness Club).

- Nutrition** is also really important – you need to eat throughout the day, starting with a breakfast with some protein in it (the good mood brain chemical serotonin is generated daily from protein building blocks), and continuing through the day every 3-4 hours (carrying healthy snacks like almonds or fruit is a great idea).

- Procrastinating on your schoolwork will just make you more anxious – even if you are doing something fun, part of you knows that you are only kicking the can down the road, and you will be more stressed and worry more – if you struggle with anxiety, you will be happier if you develop a **weekly study plan**, and for the most part, stick to it. You might think you work better under stress, when you leave things to the last minute, but if you tend towards anxiety, this adds to your suffering.

- You need some **down time** too!!! Build in some relaxing time where you don't have to DO anything, or where you can just have fun hanging out with friends. Ideally, a full day a week where you don't have to do schoolwork is a great vacation away and will help you de-stress and focus the rest of the week (as long as you are staying caught up on your work).

- Practicing **mindfulness**, even in small ways, is helpful (regular meditation is best, but if that's too hard to integrate into your life, try just stopping to take Three Relaxing Breaths, focusing only on your body and your breathing, whenever you think of it, or whenever you start to feel stressed).

- If anxiety or depression is an issue in your life, you will suffer less if you **don't use marijuana** (or at minimum, use only very occasionally). While some people use because they feel an immediate relief from anxiety, the reality is that over time, marijuana "can really mess with your brain chemistry" (Dr. Henry Emmons, author of The Chemistry of Joy and experienced college student psychiatrist). You are

actually more likely to experience more anxiety and/or depression if you regularly use marijuana.

- If you are on any mental health medications, it is important to have regular follow-ups with your doctor. Some medications can actually contribute to anxiety. If you are on medication and are still experiencing a lot of anxiety, it is really important to get your **medications re-evaluated**.
- Cut down or **eliminate caffeine and nicotine** as these are both stimulating and can kick-start feelings of anxiety. Smoking actually increases anxiety after the effects of the nicotine have worn off.
- Having too much unstructured time on a daily basis can lead to challenges (starting to lose motivation, not feeling productive, filling the time with things that don't really nourish you or give you purpose). If anxiety is an issue for you, think about developing some sort of **daily structure** that will support you in feeling good (for example, set a fairly regular awake time for each day, plan something positive that you look forward to after you get up, eat breakfast, plan into your schedule some exercise time, etc.)
- Not having enough money will make you anxious. You are better off figuring out a **realistic budget** of what you need for the year, and then getting a job with enough hours to support that, and taking out only the loans that you really need. And then it is important to figure out a way to stick to the budget. Spending money you don't have will only add to the anxiety.
- Not having any sort of **plan for the future** can be stressful; going to the Strommen career center early in your college years can help you think about choosing a satisfying major, having some career direction, and maybe planning an internship to get some experience.

**Beth Carlson, Ph.D., L.P., Augsburg Center for Wellness & Counseling, 2016*

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