# **Coping Strategies**

#### Stress 101

Your Berkeley students may face pressures ranging from their first C's, to conflicting demands on their time, to unfriendly roommates. Some may occasionally feel overwhelmed by it all. Here's how you can help.

#### By Bonnie Azab Powell

Fall 2002 | This is a high-pressure environment, and stress is part of the culture," health educator Bernard Griego told the group of Berkeley students gathered for a stress-management workshop at the Tang Center. "A little stress can be productive — it motivates you to write papers and study for exams. But it can also become overwhelming and paralyze you," he said.

The students nodded. So many of them were stressed about stress that the workshop's room was crammed, with people sitting knee to knee on the available floor space. And believe it or not, this workshop was held during Welcome Week this past August — before classes even started.

"I'm excited now, but I'm afraid that it's going to be stressful," said freshman Pammy O'Leary afterward, clutching a pamphlet on stress that was handed out. ("Health Services prints more copies of this than any other publication," says Griego, who is also a lecturer in the School of Public Health.)

With finals now approaching, you may already be hearing the increased stress in your student's voice, whether she's wailing, "I don't have time to eat!" or "I'm going to fail, I know it!"

As parents, there are many things you can do to help. No. 1 on the list, says workshop co-host Gloria Saito, is deceptively simple. Just listen.

"Parents should respond in a way that encourages their child to develop confidence and their own decision-making skills," says Saito, who is the University Health Services' director of training, counseling, and psychological services. "Don't try to solve the problem for them, as tempting as it might be to do so. Try saying, 'I hear it's really hard. What do you think you need to do? How can I help you?"

If your open-ended questions are met with a sigh, followed by an anxious, "I don't know," there are resources you can remind your student to seek out. But first it's important to understand the different kinds of stress your student could be dealing with.

### Academic Anxiety

"Making good grades!" was the first stressor that the workshop's participants shouted out. According to Dean of Students Karen Kenney, it's always one of the biggest issues for freshmen and transfer students.

"Just to get here, you have to have outstanding academic achievements," says Kenney. This year's freshman class, she said, had a median unweighted GPA (that is, not adjusted for advanced placement courses) of 3.86 in high school, and one in four students came in with a perfect 4.0. "For many new Berkeley students, this will be the first time they've ever received anything less than an A."



Gloria Saito and Bernard Griego offer stress management workshops for new students. Peg Skorpinski photo

Parents, she emphasizes, need to accept that their high achievers are now competing for grades with students equally smart. They should recognize the pressure their children put on themselves and not add to the burden by constantly monitoring their academic performance. "It's normal for students to have trouble their first semester," she says. "The grades almost always come back up in the spring as students adjust to the pace here."

Even then, they may not be the grades that you and your students are used to. "You have to help your child understand that it's okay to be a little fish in a big pond," says Kenney.

That doesn't mean that the "little fish" shouldn't take swimming lessons. Griego and Saito recommend that students form study groups in their residence halls and take advantage of the other academic resources that the halls provide. (See the <u>story</u> on Residence Halls for more information.)

Students can also visit the Student Learning Center, which offers academic counseling and tutoring.

### Navigating the Big Pond

Another stressor is loneliness. With 30,000 classmates to choose among, you'd think most students would have an easy time finding like-minded friends. But the opposite is sometimes true; Berkeley's size can be intimidating even for outgoing students. Add to that Berkeley's extensive computerized bureaucracy, and feelings of loneliness can surface.

Freshman Summer Chrisman, who will be living with her parents for her first year, is especially anxious about making new friends. "It's going to be really hard since I'm not living in a dorm," she says nervously.

Kenney says, "The best way to make this place seem smaller and less isolating is to get involved in a community, whether it's a sport, club, or service organization. It can also be a safety net in terms of students looking out for each other — someone who will notice that the student has lost weight, isn't sleeping, or is exhibiting other signs of stress."

While joining a club might seem like an obvious solution, shy students could require prodding to take the first steps. There are more than 400 student groups at Berkeley, with something to appeal to everybody, from the Anime Booster Club to the Young Entrepreneurs of Berkeley. The very variety can be overwhelming, but the Web site of the <u>Office of Student Life</u> does an excellent job of breaking them down into categories and helping student visitors find a group that

matches their interests.

Chrisman, for instance, plans to join the fencing club and ballroom dancing club. "I think there'll be people like me in them," she says.

# Studying vs. "The Simpsons"

Balancing academics with outside interests can also be stressful for students. Kenney, Griego, and Saito all say that poor time management is one of the biggest sources of stress they see. At one end of the spectrum are students who study all the time, neither exercising nor eating properly; at the other are students who neglect their studies in favor of hanging out with new friends or devoting too much time to Ultimate Frisbee.

"It's important to find a balance that works for you academically and personally," Griego told the stress workshop attendees. "Staying organized is the best way to stay on top of things. If you love watching "The Simpsons," then block out that time in your schedule every night. But don't let that half hour stretch to three as you sit around watching TV with your buddies."



One of the best stress relievers is spending time with friends. Peg Skorpinski photo

Kenney recommends that students actually schedule times for eating, exercising, and spending time with friends. "Too often, students neglect to make time for the things that can help relieve stress, like working out and eating regular meals," she says.

The University Health Services' stress brochure has an excellent section on time management, explaining how tasks that seem insurmountable can be broken down into smaller parts and tackled one by one. It urges students to reward themselves after accomplishing a task, whether with a five-minute stretch break, a favorite treat, or a chat with a friend.

There's also the Self-Care Resource Center at the Tang Center, which offers videos, books, and newsletters with stress management tips such as meditation, good nutrition, coping with the end of a relationship, and much more.

For the less self-motivated, the Student Learning Center can also help students acquire time management skills. Counselors will sit down with students and list their activities with them, helping to build a manageable schedule.

Students who could use a nudge in this area should seek it early on, says Griego. "Students are the world's greatest procrastinators. But the one thing they shouldn't put off until the end of the semester is learning how to manage their time."

Parents can do their part by encouraging their stressed-out kids to take study breaks and visit the Recreational Sports Facility to loosen up those tense muscles. They can also send care packages filled with healthy snacks around exam time.

#### Career Crises

By their junior and senior years, most students have usually learned to cope with the academic pressure, made friends, and mastered some form of effective time management. But that doesn't mean that they've left stress behind.

As students get deeper into their majors, they frequently begin to fret about their career choices. Questions start swirling through their heads: Will I be able to get a job when I graduate? Should I have picked a more service-oriented major? Will Mom and Dad kill me if I don't want to go to medical school after all?

"Parental expectations can be a huge source of stress," says Saito. "Not only do parents expect their students to perform at a certain level, but they often want them to live certain lifestyles or follow a particular career path. It can be difficult enough for kids to figure out what they want to do on their own, but it's doubly hard when they feel they might be disappointing their families."

The important thing, says Kenney, is to encourage your student to start thinking about what they want to do early. "Don't wait until you're a senior to go to the Career Center," she tells the students she meets.

Berkeley's Career Center offers many services and programs to help students take the guesswork out of picking their majors, finding summer jobs and internships, and deciding whether to go to graduate school or to work after graduation. In addition to workshops, a library, and a wealth of online information, the center has peer advisers and full-time counselors on staff who will meet with students personally.

### Keep them talking

Saito and Griego also remind students that the University Health Services' counseling center is not just for students with immediate psychological problems. Therapists there will work with students on how to cope with stress of all kinds, whether dealing with roommates, a break-up, exam anxiety, or career choices.

You can point your stressed-out sons and daughters to these many professional resources — and try not to be a stressor yourself — but above all, heed Saito's advice:

"More than anything, you want your children to talk to you," she says. "And they won't if you tell them what to do."

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http://www.berkeley.edu/calparents/letterhome/2002/fall/stress.html