

Healthy Living on Campus: How College Students Can Stay Fit

So, you're packing your "stuff" into the family car and heading off to live, play and hopefully study on a campus with several hundred or perhaps thousand other collegians. You're off to college, the first "big step" into independence, and a very significant step in this journey of life! It's a great new testing and proving ground for your faith in action.

For many, it is a time in life that has more freedom and opportunity for growth than anything experienced since birth!

Unless you're bound for one of the military academies or some other very unique institution, no one will tell you when to go to bed, when to get up, or what you need to eat for breakfast. No one even checks to see that you eat breakfast. Mom will not be there to be sure you have clean clothes, fix meals for you or remind you to do your homework. Ah yes, all kinds of freedom and independence!

It turns out that independence isn't all it's cracked up to be. With independence and freedom comes responsibility. Most college-age men and women have a youthful vitality that causes them to take good health for granted. Faced with the freedom to structure their own lifestyles, sometimes college students slip into habits that, if allowed to continue, "chip away" at their basic good health. They become fatigued, stressed out and less resistant to the respiratory viruses encountered in any environment where there are lots of people.

Can a college student structure and live a health-promoting lifestyle? We think so, and here are some suggestions that may help make sure these new freedoms and challenges inherent in the college situation are handled as they should be handled, resulting in your good and God's glory!

Establish a Routine for Your Daily Life

At first, you may really relish “freedom” from the daily patterns (meal time, bedtime, rising time, etc.) that your parents probably established and your home situation reinforced. That freedom isn’t as cool when you oversleep your first morning of classes and can’t find a clean shirt, much less the assignment due in your next class.

God made us to function best with orderly “routines”: times for going to bed, getting up, eating meals, caring for personal needs like doing laundry, doing homework, etc. Patterns and cycles are inherent components built into all of creation.

Establish patterns that make for an orderly day. Put things you need to use every day, like keys, ID-cards, notebooks, in a designated place. Keep materials for each course in its own folder or notebook or scanned in to a file in your computer. These are simple things, but they’ll bring a calming, “de-stressing” effect on your busy days. They also give you “space” in your days for surprises or extra opportunities that arise.

Get Enough Sleep

God designed us to need sleep; it’s a phase of repair and renewal for the entire body. Deprived of sufficient sleep (7-8 hours for most) we don’t think or learn well, and we’re grouchy, both of which negatively affect relationships as well as academics! Going several days without enough sleep lowers resistance, and we’re “easy prey” for the next virus that finds us. There may be times when an “all-nighter” may be needed to finish a project or to sit up with a friend who is going through a crisis, but as a general rule, little productive effort occurs after midnight. (Additional Reading: The Secret to Peak Performance: Rest).

Eat Properly

Three simple things that will improve the nutritional well-being of everyone, including college students are: (1) Eat breakfast; (2) have at least five servings of vegetables and four servings of fruit daily (a serving is $\frac{1}{2}$ cup); and (3) drink sweet, carbonated beverages (soda pop) in moderation, if at all; and drink water when you're thirsty. (To learn more about the valuable benefits of drinking water read *Why Water?*)

First, breakfast: If you aren't in the habit of having breakfast, get into it. If you're getting enough sleep, you've not had any food for 8-10 hours; you may not think you're hungry, but your body's cells are! Breakfast should be built around protein; scrambled eggs with cheese, whole grain toast and juice make a good combination. A whole-grain cereal with milk, some fruit and some yogurt is another good one; if you're in a hurry, a whole grain bagel with cheese and some fruit will work.

If you skip breakfast, you'll be sluggish and not concentrating well by mid-morning. If breakfast was a sugary doughnut or toaster pastry, your blood glucose level will "bottom-out" mid-morning, and you'll really feel tired!

As to veggies and fruits: Mom was right! They really are chock full of vitamins and minerals, and are really good for you! You don't have to like all vegetables, but do try to expand your list beyond corn and potatoes (and corn chips and potato chips don't count); have green ones, yellow ones and red ones; have them raw, as well as cooked. Fresh fruits make great snacks, and keep well in dorm rooms too!

Now for the soda-pop: Nutritionists have likened it to "liquid candy" because of its very high sugar content. The average 12-ounce soda contains about 18 teaspoons of sugar; that's a lot of calories that bring with them no other nutritive value. There certainly is nothing harmful about enjoying an occasional soda; you'll have problems though when you drink two or three a day! When you're hot and thirsty, cold water

really hits the spot, and is better for your body.

Learn to Manage the Stressors of College Life

College life, wonderful and exciting as it is, has numerous stress-inducing aspects. There are not only the expected academic hurdles to clear, but also relationships and the business of figuring out God's plan for your life as well. In addition to those unavoidable stressors, we manage to create many of our own stressors, and those are the ones we need to work on avoiding.

Those stressors inherent in the college experience, we need to learn to manage. Over time, stress that we don't manage well produces fatigue, lowers resistance and results in a host of signs and symptoms that signal an undermining of health and vitality. So how can a college student avoid or manage stress? Here are some suggestions that we know work:

- **Don't procrastinate.** Due dates for papers and projects that seem far in the future will be here before you know it! Time pressure is a major cause of stress; lessen it by starting early and completing major projects in a step-wise, organized fashion. Don't let small problems grow into big ones before doing anything about them. If you're feeling "lost" in a class, see your professor before you've accumulated a series of failed quizzes. If you thought you wanted to be an engineer, but realize you're better suited to communications, see your adviser and make a change. Problems ignored don't go away; they grow, and produce stress.
- **Don't demand perfection of yourself.** Students who've been high achievers in high school sometimes really become stressed over a lower-than-expected grade on a quiz or exam. Our Creator knows we're not perfect; what He expects is our honest best effort. Even the best students rarely "ace" every exam; keep it in perspective, and use your energy in understanding those

concepts on which you were foggy.

- **Don't over-commit your time and energy.** There are a multitude of "extra-curricular" things on which to spend time in college. Ministry activities, social events, pre-professional organizations, intramural sports or varsity athletics, or just hanging out with friends can totally consume your time. You can't do everything; if you try, you will be "frazzled." If this is your first college experience, limit your extracurricular involvements to only one or two in your first term; see how much discretionary time your studies allow. Don't misapply Philippians 4:13; we can't do all things, but rather we can do all things God would have us to do. Jesus Himself did not heal everyone, feed everyone, nor disciple everyone.
- **Learn to live in today rather than yesterday or tomorrow.** We can wear ourselves out worrying about mistakes we made yesterday or things that may happen tomorrow. That is an "exercise in exhaustion." Christ told His followers not to worry about tomorrow. God gives us grace for one day at a time; live to the utmost the day you're in, and when tomorrow comes, we'll find that God's grace has preceded us.
- **Don't let the "busyness" of college life crowd personal devotions and prayer out of your daily routine.** We need time to re-charge our spiritual batteries; to be quiet and open to what God wants to tell us from His word; and to give Him our thanks and worship, as well as turn over our burdens to Him. Satan would be really pleased to help this get squeezed out of our schedules, even by really good things. Be very jealous of your time with God; you'll be glad you are.
- **Learn to laugh.** Look for the humor in life; even a lot of the stressful situations we get into have a funny side. Look for it, and let yourself laugh. Be ready to laugh at yourself and with others. Laughter relaxes tense muscles, causes deep breathing and lowers the

stress response. Obviously, not all of life's difficult situations have a "funny" side; if you must deal with one of those for several days, look for a humorous book or article.

Additional Reading: When we demand perfection, we are taking our lives out of God's control and trying to control it alone without His peace and confidence. Too often we take it too far: Self-Injury, Taking Pain to the Extreme

Additional Reading: Are you living today with a sense a defeat unable to overcome temptations and habits? Learn to live today in God's grace and strength: Right-Side Up: Freedom From Porn and Profanity For Men.

Build at least a half-hour of physical exercise into your daily routine. It doesn't take a genius to look at our bodies and see that they are designed for movement. They're not only designed to move, they're designed to *need* to move. However, very little of what most of us have to do each day at college requires significant physical effort.

The role computers play in the responsibilities of college life doesn't help the situation, either. We can "go" to virtual libraries, labs and many other places and never get out of our seat! And that doesn't even include our use of the computer for communication and recreation.

Most schools have facilities and programming available to help with this essential component of good stewardship of the body. Plan how and when you will use them; then do it! Build variety into what you do if that's what you enjoy; build repetition into what you do if that's what you like. Either way, build consistency for your activity program.

Intramural teams can be great opportunities for multi-tasking: socializing, exercising and competing. Fitness areas on campus can provide opportunity for some much-needed time alone as you listen to music or memorize Scripture while walking on the

treadmill or working your way through the circuit. And it's not a bad place to meet others, either, if that's what you need to refresh and renew!

Bottom line ... "off to college" and "healthy lifestyle" are not mutually exclusive concepts. But it takes care, planning and intentionality to stay fit and live healthy. The default setting for college life is not necessarily "healthy." We would do well to remember Paul's directives to the Christians in the church at Corinth regarding freedom.

He wrote: "'Everything is permissible'—but not everything is beneficial. 'Everything is permissible'—but not everything is constructive." After this directive in 1 Corinthians 10:23, he continued to say "So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God." Let the banner flying over your "off to college" experience be: For the glory of God!

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