

# Preparing for College: Mental & Emotional Readiness



# Why Emotional Readiness Matters



## Mental Health Risk

Anxiety, depression, and stress are increasingly common among college students and can interfere with academic performance and daily functioning.



## High-Risk Period

The first year of college is a high-risk period for mental health challenges, especially for students who lack emotional coping skills.



## Beyond Academics

Academic prep alone isn't enough. Teens who focus only on grades and résumés may be unprepared for the emotional weight of living away from home.

# What Emotional Readiness Actually Means



## Regulate Emotions

Having tools to manage and process difficult feelings without shutting down or acting out.



## Solve Problems

Independently working through challenges – even when the answer isn't obvious.



## Ask for Help

Knowing when and how to seek support – and seeing it as a strength, not a weakness.



## Manage Uncertainty

Building the mental flexibility to handle change, new relationships, and independence all at once.



## Accept Struggle

Understanding that struggling during this transition doesn't mean failing – it's part of the process. Acceptance is KEY.

# 6 Evidence-Based Strategies for Emotional Readiness



## 1. Talk About Feelings Early

Start conversations about what leaving home will *actually* feel like – before move-in day.



## 2. Practice Independence Gradually

Build real-life skills during junior and senior year – not all at once when they arrive.



## 3. Build a Support System

Identify campus and off-campus resources *before* a crisis happens.



## 4. Recognize Struggle Early

Teach teens to spot their own early warning signs before things escalate.



## 5. Normalize Adjustment

Reframe homesickness and doubt as normal – not signs that something is wrong.



## 6. Model Emotional Openness

Teens learn how to handle hard emotions by watching the adults around them.

# Start Conversations About Feelings

As a parent, your mind may go straight to logistics – packing lists, class schedules, roommate assignments. But starting conversations early about the **emotional side of leaving** normalizes the feelings that will come up.

## Open the Door

"I imagine leaving for college might bring up a mix of feelings – excitement, nervousness, maybe even sadness. What comes up for you when you think about it?"

## Hold Both Truths

"It makes sense that you'd feel sad about leaving, even though you're looking forward to going. Both can be true."

## For Parents Too

"I've been feeling a mix of pride and worry about this change. That's normal for me as your parent – and I'm sharing it because I want us to be honest with each other."

- ⓘ Resist the urge to immediately problem-solve or suggest solutions. Just sit in the emotion with your teen – unless they specifically ask for suggestions.

# Practice Independence Gradually

College requires managing time, money, health, sleep, social life, and academics – all at once. During **junior and senior year**, create opportunities to practice before they leave.



## Own Their Schedule

Managing their own time and appointments without reminders from parents.



## Health Advocacy

Making their own medical appointments and speaking directly with providers.



## Daily Life Skills

Doing their own laundry, grocery shopping, and managing a basic budget.



## Problem-Solving

Working through conflicts with friends or teachers without parental intervention.

**For parents:** Stepping back sends a powerful message – "I trust you and your ability to manage your own life." If they make a mistake, they can learn and try again. That's the point.

# Build a Support System Before They Leave

Many teens assume they'll just "figure it out" once they get to college. But knowing where to turn for help **before** a crisis happens is protective. Work together to map out resources ahead of time.

## On Campus

- Campus counseling services
- Student health centers
- Academic advisors
- Resident advisors (RAs)

## Off Campus

- Trusted family members
- Friends from home
- Mentors and coaches
- Ollie psychologist

## Crisis Resources

- Crisis Text Line: Text **HOME** to **741741**
- 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline
- Campus emergency mental health

**i** **For parents:** Your role is shifting from *primary* support to being part of a broader network. This can feel like a loss – but it's a sign of healthy development. You've already taught them well.

# Teach Teens to Recognize When They're Struggling

Many teens don't realize they're struggling until they're already in crisis. Teaching them to notice **early warning signs** helps them reach out for support sooner.

## Sleep Changes

Sleeping much more or much less than usual – a common first sign of distress.

## Withdrawal

Avoiding things they used to enjoy, pulling away from friends, or skipping classes regularly.

## Persistent Mood Shifts

Feeling irritable, sad, or anxious most of the time – not just occasionally.

## Difficulty Concentrating

Struggling to focus on tasks, study, or complete assignments over time.

## Unhealthy Coping

Using substances to cope, or having thoughts of self-harm.

**i** Encourage a weekly check-in habit: *"How am I doing? Am I taking care of myself? Do I need more support right now?"* – Simple questions that can become a lifelong practice.

# Normalize Homesickness & Adjustment Struggles

Almost all college students experience some degree of homesickness, loneliness, or doubt during the first semester. When teens expect the transition to feel seamless, they may interpret normal adjustment as a sign that they made the wrong choice.

## Prepare Them

"The first few weeks might feel hard. You might miss home, feel lonely, or wonder if you made the right decision. That doesn't mean something is wrong — it means you're adjusting to something big."

## Encourage Action

"If you're feeling lonely or down, what's one small thing you could try?"

## When They Call Upset

"This sounds really hard right now. I'm here with you." — Then wait to see if they want advice, or just to feel heard.

- ⓘ Resist the instinct to fix it immediately — suggesting they come home for the weekend or jumping into problem-solving can accidentally signal that the struggle is something to escape, not move through.

# Model Emotional Openness as a Parent

Teens learn how to handle difficult emotions by **watching the adults around them**. If parents avoid talking about their own feelings or present a front that everything is fine, teens may believe they need to do the same.



## Share Your Feelings

"I'm really going to miss you when you leave AND I'm also so excited for you to have this experience."



## Acknowledge Your Anxiety

"I've been feeling a little anxious about you being far away. That's normal for me as your parent, and I'm working through it."

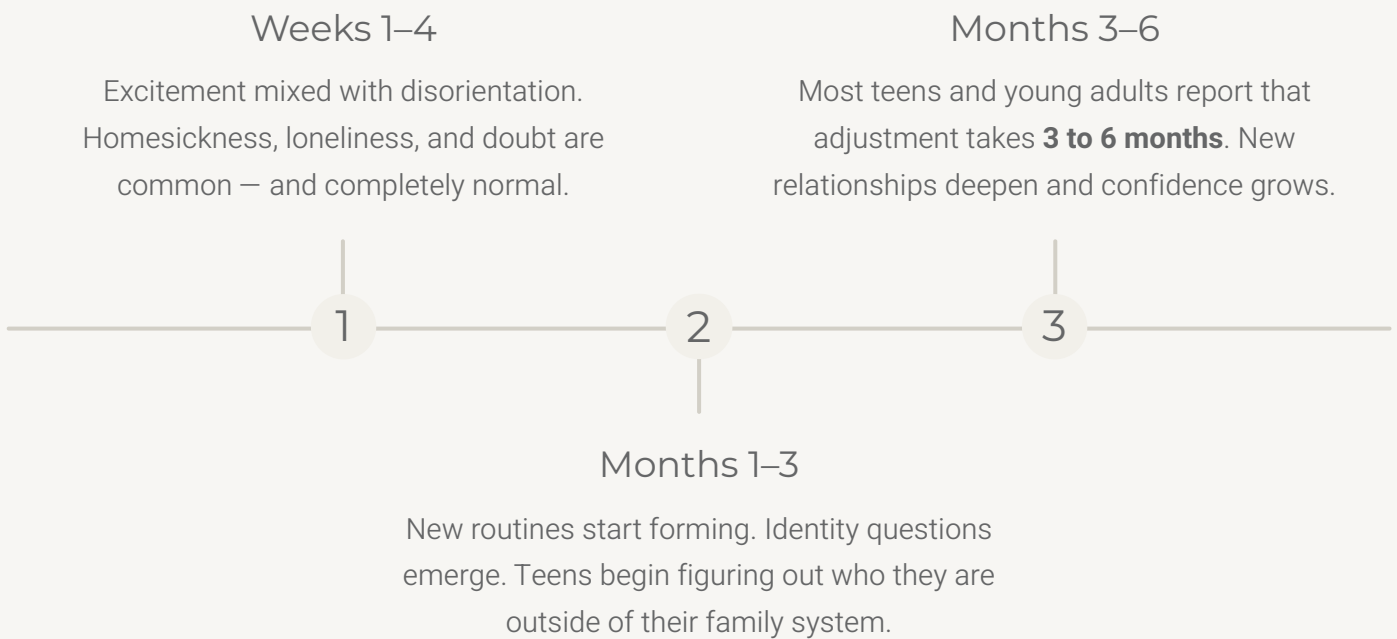


## Show Healthy Coping

"I've been really stressed this week, so I made time to go for a walk and talk to a friend. That helped me feel more grounded."

# Understanding the Adjustment Timeline

The transition to college is a developmental milestone that involves grief, growth, and uncertainty. Knowing what to expect helps both teens and parents stay grounded.



## For Parents: Empty Nest Syndrome Is Real

### What You Might Feel

Loss, purposelessness, or questioning your identity as a parent. Checking your phone constantly or feeling hurt when they seem fine.

### What It Means

Your teen pulling away doesn't mean they don't need you – it means they're doing what they're developmentally supposed to do.

### How to Navigate It

Let them set the rhythm of communication. Ask open-ended questions. Trust that silence doesn't always mean crisis.

# When to Seek Additional Support

Some difficulty adjusting is expected and normal. But certain patterns signal that a teen may need professional help – especially when they persist beyond the first semester or significantly interfere with daily functioning.

## Persistent Sadness or Hopelessness

Lasting for weeks – not just a difficult day or two.

## Social & Academic Withdrawal

Regularly avoiding classes, all social activities, or withdrawing from daily life.

## Risky Behaviors

Engaging in substance use or other risky behaviors as a way to cope.

## Thoughts of Self-Harm

Any expressions of self-harm or suicidal ideation should be taken seriously immediately.

## Physical Symptoms

Recurring physical complaints with no medical explanation, significant sleep disruption, or sharp academic decline.

- ✔ Encourage your teen to connect with **campus counseling**, reach out to their **Ollie psychologist**, or consult a trusted mental health provider. Asking for support is not a sign of weakness – it's a sign of self-awareness. **Ollie is here for your family during this chapter.**

# References

- References: American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP), American Psychological Association (APA), Child Mind Institute, World Health Organization (WHO) World Mental Health Surveys International College Student Project, Society of Clinical Child and Adolescent Psychology (SCCAP), Psychiatric Services.