

Workaholism among college students on the rise

(CPS) — Whether it's slaving over books or at a part-time job, college students risk burn-out with late hours and hectic schedules in the race to get a diploma.

Workaholism wears many faces in the college population: It shows up in an overachieving, perfectionist "superstudent," a cash-strapped scholar juggling a job and schoolwork, or a college athlete who squeezes study between hours of practice, say psychologists who counsel stressed-out students.

"There is a sense, nationwide, that mental health staffs are seeing more distressed college students," said Phillip Meilman, director of counseling at the College of William and Mary in Virginia and author of "Beating the College Blues."

"There is no hard data, however, but there is a subjective impression that there is a higher level of dysfunction, that there are more serious problems," Meilman said, noting that substance abuse is often an attempt to regulate stress.

The average college experience today is no longer the easy, unrushed transition into adulthood that it used to be.

"The stakes have been raised to the point that everyone has to do more to arrive at the same place, and that becomes stressful and unhealthy," Meilman said.

Mental health experts agree that economic problems are taking a toll on students, and many are seeking help at university counseling centers to cope with the complexities of their lives.

"The increasing cost of college, the problematic economy, coupled with students placing unrealistic demands on themselves, are having an impact on students and on how much they can engage in the learning process," said Alan Berkowitz, director of the counseling center at Hobart and William Smith Colleges in New York.

Students are working more hours at part-time and full-time jobs and are getting paid less for their efforts. Educators complain that bleary-eyed students, struggling to pay rent and tuition, often put academics on the back burner.

However, colleges and universities are becoming more enlightened about stress.

New York University has

Major sources of stress

- Lack of clear goals and direction in academic life.
- Lots of responsibility but little authority.
- Not being able to voice complaints, express strong feelings, or get things off your chest.
- Prejudice because of age, gender, race, religion, social standing or sexual preference.
- Unpleasant study or work conditions due to polluted air, crowded classrooms, excessive noise.
- Chronic and unpredictable commuting problems that are beyond a student's control.
- Inability to work with fellow students or professors because of differences in values.
- Inadequate recognition of good academic performance.
- Not being able to use personal talents and abilities to their full potential.
- Relationship problems.

Source: The American Institute of Stress

more than 50 programs in residence halls to assist students in coping with stress. One group, known as "Peers Ears," offers walk-in offices staffed with trained students who offer support and encouragement to harassed students.

At Swarthmore College in Pennsylvania, a campus-wide "howl" can be heard for miles the night before exams as students are encouraged to let off steam with a horrifying school-wide primal scream. The occasion has been dubbed "Students Collectively Realizing Exams Are Monday," but is better known as SCREAM.

Student stress seems to get worse as years go by, according to an article in *The New York Times* that recently reported that the mental health center at the University of Washington in Seattle sees more graduate and professional students than undergraduates, and more seniors than juniors.

Even at institutions where money worries take a backseat to academic concerns, the issue of workaholism has taken on new dimensions over past five years.

At Harvard University, for example, academic and sports competition has become so fierce that students are being offered a new relaxation program to help them let go of stress.

"We are organizing a program with Herbert Benson, the author of 'Relaxation Response,' to help our people learn his techniques," said Dr. Randolph Catlin, director of mental health services at Harvard University.

"We tend to have high

achievers here," Catlin said. "There is an old adage that everyone here is used to being in the top 10 percent of their high school class, and it's hard to realize that only 10 percent get into our 10 percent."

Athletes also face conflicting pressures to succeed academically and athletically.

"We look forward to working with coaches eventually," Catlin added. "There is a lot of stress among the swimmers, divers, and track stars."

Mental health workers say that habitual, addictive work patterns among college students have childhood roots, and even children as young as 4, 5 and 6 are feeling pressured to compete with their peers in today's world.

"There is a lot of rewarding of that kind of behavior in our society," said Dr. Mort Ormond, author of "The 14-Day Stress Cure," who says that students of all ages are suffering an "epidemic of stress."

Some reports have shown that student stress, particularly around exam times, is associated with a decline in the body's immune system defenses, leaving it vulnerable to illnesses ranging from the common cold to recurring herpes attacks.

Studies indicate that not only do students suffer anxiety

Stress reduction techniques

SELF-DIRECTED TECHNIQUES

- Prioritize activities.
- Exercise: jogging, aerobics.
- Recreation: hobbies, sports, travel.
- Activities: painting, sculpting.
- Social support systems: group activity, involvement in service or social organization, religious activities.

BEHAVIORAL APPROACHES

- Examine life goals.
- Identify stressors.
- Recognize harmful traits.

RELAXATION TRAINING

- Meditation.
- Guided imagery.
- Muscle relaxation exercises.
- Hypnosis.

BIOFEEDBACK

- Muscle tension control.
- Temperature control.
- Galvanic skin response.

PHARMACOLOGIC

- Sedatives.
- Tranquillizers.
- Antidepressants.
- Beta blockers.

Source: Dr. Paul Rosch, American Institute of Stress

over test results, but they have an increase in irritability around examination time that is accompanied by a decline in positive experiences and socializing.

At the University of California, Berkeley, a coffee shop manager reported that business increases by 30 percent the week before exams when 550 pounds of coffee are consumed by stressed-out students in comparison to the usual 400 pounds.

Mental health experts say they can often chart the stress level at their institutions by the academic schedule and the time of year.

"We can see the stress level by the caseload at the counseling center," Meilman said.

"It is usually low at the beginning of the academic year, it crescendos at midterms, and from midterms to finals it is running at a peak. After finals, the caseload drops to zero," he said.

"Right now I am trying to deal with an onslaught of new

cases. I feel like an air traffic controller who is trying to control patients getting to therapists," he said, adding that he had eight student file folders on his desk, but no counselors available.

"Students always wait until they are in great distress before seeking help," he added.

Meilman said that 25 percent of the student body at the College of William & Mary are employed and generally more prone to stress.

But Meilman noted that he is most concerned about a certain type of student, who may or may not hold an outside job, but who is "perfectionistic, intense, and tense" with a tendency to be anti-social.

"Their lives have become a grind," he said.

Treatment for workaholism requires a realization on the part of the student that they are behaving in a compulsive way. In many cases, Meilman said students are unaware of their unhealthy attitudes toward work.

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