

Seniors' Concerns

“What Are You Doing After Graduation?”

As a college senior, this is a question you are probably being asked on a regular basis. And if you are like many college seniors, you may be struggling to answer the question with a degree of confidence. College seniors often feel pressure to be enthusiastic about the future, or to have a set plan that will hopefully satisfy others (i.e. parents and other family members, friends, professors, etc.). A common societal expectation at the time of college graduation is that one is looking optimistically ahead to the future. But the often-unrecognized reality is that although graduating college can be a very exciting time in life, it can also bring feelings of fear, sadness, confusion, and doubt. This is because graduation is an important life change, and life transitions, even if positive and growth producing, are also typically stressful.

The way a student experiences the approach of graduation is unique and individual, and depends on one's personality, personal circumstances, coping style, and both positive and negative experiences in college over the previous four (or more) years. There are some students who say they can't wait to graduate, and others who have no desire to leave college. But probably the majority of seniors feel mixed emotions at varying times. It's possible, for example, to feel proud of one's accomplishments, and to look forward to a sense of freedom (e.g. from studying, money worries, friendship problems, etc.). But at the same time, there may be a real sense of loss about the college years coming to an end and worry about the next stage of life.

Much of the stress of senior year can be attributed to uncertainty about the future, and the loss of a sense of predictability. Questions naturally arise about what will come next in many different areas of life (e.g. whether to look for a job or go to graduate school, whether to pursue a career in one's major, where to live, whether to return home or not, continue a romantic relationship, etc.). Not knowing the answers to these questions can be difficult, and the differing opinions of friends, family, and acquaintances may be confusing. It is also common for seniors to feel insecure, especially if friends and acquaintances seem to be having more success in particular ways (e.g. with a job or acceptance to graduate school, having a serious romantic relationship, etc.). It can be challenging as a college senior to know and to trust one's own decisions for the future.

Another common fear for many seniors is the approach of what seems like a dividing line between youth and the responsibilities of adulthood. Many seniors worry about being expected to be a full adult and fear “being out in the real world”. Some students feel a sense of pressure to “have fun” and to try to enjoy senior year as much as possible. Balancing one's social life, academics, and activities on campus, and staying motivated, may become more difficult during the last year of college.

How to Manage the Senior Transition

If you are a graduating senior, it is important to be aware of the physical, emotional and behavioral

changes that may result from stress.

Know that you may find it more difficult to cope with other life issues during this time. Feeling emotionally sensitive or vulnerable, confused, sad, moody, or unmotivated can be related to the anticipation of a major life change. Often, just realizing that one is in a transition period and that it is a naturally stressful time can help put things in perspective. It may be helpful to think about how you might have coped with other life transitions and how you adjusted with time (e.g. leaving high school to go to college, coping with a move to a new home, etc.). Try to accept that it is not possible to have all the answers to the future at this point in time. Most college graduates build confidence gradually as new life patterns become established.

It is also helpful as a senior to allow yourself to mourn the losses that you may be experiencing as you say goodbye to an important time in your life. Let yourself reflect on the positive times, as well as acknowledge any disappointments that have occurred during college. As the end of senior year approaches, take the time to say farewell to others even if it feels sad or difficult. Senior events and celebrations, in particular, are a way of bringing closure to the college years. Though often bittersweet, these ending rituals are important in helping to bring a sense of resolution that helps one to move on without regrets. As graduation approaches, consider what has been important in your college experience and what is worth carrying forward into the future. You might reflect upon important experiences and what you have learned about yourself that will help you in the future. You might also wish to make plans with close friend(s) to get together after graduation, knowing that you can continue relationships that have become important to you.

For More Information

Union College Counseling Center psychologists are available to provide free and confidential counseling to seniors who would like more help in dealing with adjustment to graduating or with other concerns. To make an appointment, call (518) 388-6161 or stop by the front desk at the Wicker Wellness Center.