

Strong Start: Caring for Yourself Through the Transition

A Real Talk Guide to Mental Health in Your First Year of College

Brought to you by Women's Therapy Centre and Post-Secondary Pathways



New beginnings, old nerves, and everything in between. You've got this.

New Chapter, Real Feelings

Let's be honest: starting college/university is huge. You're suddenly navigating independence, a whole new environment, academic pressure, and figuring out who your people are. It's a major life pivot, and your brain and body are just trying to keep up.

Some students coast through with only a few bumps. Others feel like they've been tossed into emotional dodgeball. Both are valid. And if you're feeling off? That doesn't mean you're weak. It means you're adjusting.

Here's what might show up, why it makes sense, and how to support yourself without pretending everything's fine when it's not.

Anxiety & Depression

What It Looks Like:

Your heart races during lectures. You're low-key panicking about keeping up. Or maybe you feel weirdly numb—like you should be excited, but you're not. Sound familiar?

Why It Happens:

You've left your comfort zone. You're figuring out how to belong, perform, survive. That's a lot. Your brain's just trying to keep you safe—even if it's being a little dramatic about it. Add in loneliness or imposter syndrome, and yeah, it tracks.

Body's Cues:

- Can't sleep or always tired
- Tight chest, clenched jaw, or that stomach pit
- Crying out of nowhere or feeling emotionally "flat"

Ways to Support Yourself:

- Talk to someone—even a small share can dial things down
- Replace "what's wrong with me" with "what's happening to me"

Somatic resets:

- *Orienting*: Slowly turn your head and eyes around the room. Find one thing that feels good or neutral. Stay with it.
- *Humming*: Sounds weird but trust—humming calms your nervous system. Do it in the shower, while studying, wherever.

Substance Use & Misuse

What It Looks Like:

You're drinking more than you expected, vaping between classes, or using something to take the edge off. Maybe it's social. Maybe it's solo. Either way, it's starting to feel a little too frequent.



Why It Happens:

Coping is hard. Substances offer a shortcut to chill, connection, or numbing—but they can take more than they give. Especially if you're overwhelmed or feeling alone.

Body's Cues:

- Needing substances to relax or function
- Feeling off when you don't use
- Mood swings or sketchy memory gaps

Ways to Support Yourself:

- Get curious: "What am I trying to feel (or avoid) here?"
- Know that support isn't punishment—it's power

Somatic resets:

- *Self-holding*: Hug your own arms or cradle your face. Feels silly, works wonders.
- *5-5-5 breathing*: Inhale for 5. Hold for 5. Exhale for 5. Repeat. It's a nervous system love note.

Academic Pressure

What It Looks Like in College:

You're constantly thinking about grades. You don't feel smart enough. You're either grinding nonstop or avoiding everything. "Am I even cut out for this?" is a daily thought.

Why It Happens:

College shifts your identity. You used to be a top student—now everyone is. If achievement made you feel "enough" growing up, it's hard to slow down or ask for help now.

Body's Cues:

- Racing thoughts or panic spirals
- Overwhelm followed by Netflix black holes
- Stress headaches, clenched fists, or insomnia

Ways to Support Yourself:

- Redefine success: "Was I kind to myself today?" counts.
- Take breaks like they're part of the plan (because they are)

Somatic resets:

- *Progressive release*: Tense and relax your fists, shoulders, and jaw. Let it go.
- *Body scan*: Check in with each part of your body from toes to head. No fixing—just noticing.



Homesickness & Social Isolation

What It Looks Like in College:

Everyone looks like they've already found their group. You're counting the days until your next trip home. Or you're hanging out but still feeling kind of invisible.

Why It Happens:

Your brain is wired for connection. Leaving your people—even if you were ready—can shake your sense of safety. Feeling “out of place” is a totally valid part of adjusting.

Body's Cues:

- Random sadness or deep nostalgia
- Avoiding social stuff even though you're lonely
- Feeling physically heavy or drained

Ways to Support Yourself:

- Text that friend from home. Connection counts—even from afar
- Try smaller social settings where you can show up as you

Somatic resets:

- *Rocking*: Literally rock back and forth while sitting—calms your whole system
- *Weighted pressure*: Hug a pillow, blanket, or put a heavy book on your chest. It grounds you.

Sleep Struggles

What It Looks Like in College:

You're wide awake at 3 a.m., exhausted all day, or doing the dreaded overthink-loop right before bed.

Why It Happens:

Stress, irregular schedules, and a new environment = your brain not wanting to shut down. Plus, dorms are loud and FOMO is real.

Body's Cues:

- Can't fall or stay asleep
- Jumpy, groggy, or wired
- Digestive stuff or headaches

Ways to Support Yourself:

- No more doom-scrolling at midnight (seriously, your brain needs a break)
- Try rituals—same bedtime, dim lights, a podcast you've heard 100 times

Somatic resets:

- *Legs up wall*: Lie down and put your legs up. It tells your body “you're safe now.”



- *Butterfly hug*: Cross your arms and tap each shoulder slowly. You've got this.

Financial Strain

What It Looks Like in College:

You're stressing over every coffee, dodging the "let's go out" invites, or skipping meals to stretch your budget.

Why It Happens:

Money anxiety hits different when you're on your own. And if you grew up where money was tight or taboo, it's even more triggering.

Body's Cues:

- Tight chest or stomach when checking your account
- Shame around spending or asking for help
- Wanting to escape the stress by ignoring it

Ways to Support Yourself:

- Talk to someone—financial aid counselors exist for a reason
- Break money stuff into small chunks: one bill, one budget step

Somatic resets:

- *Grounding touch*: Press your feet into the floor and your hands into your thighs.
- *Box breathing while budgeting*: Add calm to chaos—your body will thank you.

Food & Body Stuff

What It Looks Like in College:

Skipping meals, obsessing over what you eat, or feeling at war with your reflection. You might feel "in control" or completely out of it.

Why It Happens:

Stress, body image pressure, and a search for control can all mess with your relationship to food. This isn't about vanity—it's about coping.

Body's Cues:

- Thoughts about food or your body that take over your brain
- Skipping social meals or eating secretly
- Exhaustion, dizziness, or irritability

Ways to Support Yourself:

- You're allowed to eat. You're allowed to feel
- Food is fuel—and you deserve to feel energized and supported.



Somatic resets:

- *Hand on belly check-in*: Pause before eating and ask “What would feel good to my body right now?”
- *Mirror kindness*: Look at yourself and say, “I’m learning to be gentle here.” Even if you don’t believe it yet.

You’re Allowed to Feel All of It—And You’re Not Alone

Some of you might breeze through this shift. Others might feel like you’ve lost your emotional compass. Either way, there’s no grade for how you handle your child leaving home. There’s only this: you’re showing up. You care. And that’s everything.

If you’re finding this chapter harder than expected, don’t wait to ask for support. Your child’s university counselling office may have parent resources—and you’re also welcome to connect virtually with Erin Smith, a counsellor at McMaster University and therapist at Women’s Therapy Centre, who specializes in guiding students *and* parents through this transition.

This season won’t last forever. But while you’re in it, support is here.

In support of all your chapters,

The Team at Women’s Therapy Centre



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