



Coping with change

The transition to post-secondary studies can be life-changing, and for some people, it's their first experience of this kind. For this reason, it may be hard to orient yourself and learn to cope in a new environment. Feelings such as homesickness, stress, worries concerning finances and challenges with self-identity are far more common than you expect.

The good news is, you are not alone. Here are some of the changes you may encounter, along with strategies to help you manage the transition.

Types of changes as a post-secondary student.

It is important to note that this list does not include all changes and experiences such as housing, relocation and separation from culture which are all entirely valid.

Academic

- Becoming responsible for all time management, including creating your own schedule.
- Larger academic environment and less teacher interaction compared to secondary school.
- Higher academic demands, particularly in degrees requiring extra training, such as nursing¹.

Social

- Changes in beliefs, lifestyle, habits, and behaviours.
- Setting up a new social network².
- Adjusting to the new environment.

Financial

- Tracking financials and planning budgets.
- Becoming more aware of your spending.
- Getting a first or new job to contribute to expenses.



Becoming independent.

A huge part of getting a post-secondary education is setting yourself up for future careers and adulthood. Being independent appears in many forms and the transition can be scary, especially in a new environment. Self-reflection is vital to setting yourself up in the best way possible for this big transition.

Here are some suggestions to set yourself up for success.



Plan, plan, plan.

With no authoritative figure to monitor daily activities, the structure of your everyday life during post-secondary education might seem daunting. Planning out your schedule to discover what you need to do, and when, can help reduce the stress that accompanies course selection and graduation requirements². This also allows time for your social endeavours and self-care activities. To help achieve this, identify what inhibits your focus during academic times and what you need to do to give yourself the best opportunities. This may mean studying in different spaces, with different people, alone, or changing your studying methods.



Determining your self-identity.

Developing your autonomy – the capacity to govern oneself and control one's individual learning² – is a major part of the post-secondary experience. In developing your autonomy, you develop your identity: you are setting your future goals and how to achieve them, trying new activities, opportunities, and making bigger decisions about your life that would previously have been discussed with or made by authoritative figures. It is important to encourage yourself to explore activities outside of your comfort zone, where you may not always feel super confident. Balancing this exploration while maintaining comfort in your abilities helps develop your autonomy².



Learning about yourself.

Freedom at this important stage enables endless opportunities for change and developing the confidence to embrace change in the most positive way. Decide if your approach and activities align with personal values, future aspirations, and goals. Take it one day at a time so you don't overwhelm yourself or feel the need to meet the expectations of others³.



Coping strategies

It is important to note that no individual copes the same way. Strategies vary and are used differently for each situation. Here are some ideas to help you cope with change.

Managing stress.

Identify the coping strategies that best benefit you by evaluating your stress, its source, and the available resources you have to manage it. When approaching a situation, coping strategies can provide one of two outcomes: either positive and valued outcomes, known as adaptive coping; or negative and avoidance-based behaviours, known as maladaptive coping. Here are three general types of coping which can be good (or adaptive) or bad (maladaptive) depending on the situation.

Types of coping:

Emotion-focused coping. Focuses on managing the emotional response to a stressful situation⁵. A form of adaptive coping, emotion-focused coping allows you to personally reflect, speak to someone about your stressful feelings in a one-on-one discussion with a professional or seeking support from others while still respecting their boundaries⁴.

Problem-focused coping. Focuses on targeting and remedying a harmful situation⁵. In this form of adaptive coping, you analyze what causes stressful situations to try and prevent them from occurring again⁴. To minimize being overwhelmed by your changing environment, explore university resources, such as workshops at the start of the year to orient yourself. Information shared at workshops and orientation sessions can help you know what's available in case of future stress.

Avoidance-focused coping. Involves removing yourself mentally or physically from the situation that's causing stress⁵. Seen as a form of maladaptive coping, avoidance-focused coping has been found to be the least beneficial in the long-term⁴. Higher stress levels are seen in individuals who avoid situations instead of finding ways to attempt to cope with and prevent them⁵.



“Change is
driven by
motivation”⁴

Get organized.

Organizing your time, space, and social activities provides a way to cope with stress and change. It can help you get the most out of your post-secondary years. Here are some suggestions for getting organized.

Plan out your academic activities.



Laying out your courses, credit requirements, hopes, and achievements provides a general path for the year ahead. A forward-looking plan will help minimize stress when it comes to organizing your time and courses, and can be used in future years when checking what requirements, you still need to meet.

Set up a planner or calendar.



Keeping track of assignments, tasks, and exam dates will help you make a study schedule and relieve the stress that surrounds deadlines and exam season. Visually seeing dates, deadlines and how everything works together in a larger plan makes it a little easier to follow a day-by-day schedule.

Coordinate schedules with friends and roommates.



Organizing studying and activities with friends can provide a structure to your scheduling, as it's a commitment, in a fun way.

Peer pressure resilience.

Peer pressure can be passive, active, or indirect. You may give into peer pressure for any number of reasons: to be liked and included, to fit in ("everyone's doing it"), or to prevent criticism from others. Mixed with the freedom that comes with the post-secondary experience, you may be more likely to experiment with alcohol or substances and partake in activities you previously wouldn't have. Here are some methods to help resist peer pressure:

Develop higher resilience.

- High resilience to peer pressure has been shown in students with high self-esteem, goals, social skills, a positive outlook on the future and the ability to interact with many cultures and backgrounds⁷.

Recognize and seek out positive peer pressure.

- Not all peer pressure is negative. Positive peer pressure is the encouragement you receive and give within your social network to motivate you to achieve your goals and maintain a positive outlook.

Resist peer pressure.

- Self-confidence is key to resisting peer pressure in uncomfortable situations. Evaluating your friendships and activities – and their effects on your mindset and behaviours – helps build not only your identity, but your confidence in resisting what makes you uncomfortable. Identifying your own values, beliefs, and future goals enables you to align your activities with your own comfort level⁷.

Did you know?

Peer pressure is the best predictor of alcohol consumption in university students⁶.

Maintaining your relationships and social supports

Geographic mobility, or moving outside where you normally live, is one of the most common causes for friendships to disintegrate⁸. However, digital communication provides multiple ways to maintain a relationship with someone despite being apart. Frequent communication, through emails, phone calls, FaceTime, or chat functions, predicts stronger friendships that endure the distance. Phone calls have shown to have higher intimacy than text or email as deeper and more intimate conversations can be had. This is particularly important for maintaining personal relationships you have with family, close friends, and significant others⁸. University and public libraries provide access to computers and Internet for those who may not have access to devices.



Extra Resources

If you or someone you know is struggling to cope with change or anything listed above, please see the resources below or seek advice from a medical professional.

- **Centre for Parent and Teen Communication:** [8 Strategies to Handle Peer Pressure \(parentandteen.com\)](https://parentandteen.com/8-strategies-to-handle-peer-pressure/).
- **Self-advocating:** [Speaking Out for Yourself: A Self-Help Guide | HealthyPlace](https://www.healthypersons.ca/speaking-out-for-yourself-a-self-help-guide/)
- **Staying Organised:** [How to be more organised in 9 easy steps - Save the Student](https://www.savethestudent.com/how-to-be-more-organised-in-9-easy-steps/)

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