



RU

Adjusted?

The transition from high school to university is an exciting one, but it can be challenging as you try to find your feet – and thoughts – in a new environment. You may have heard other people describe their experiences of university, but it still remains quite a personal and unique experience! It is a time of great independence and freedom, but there is also a great need for solid structure and ongoing support in order for you to meet the academic demands and adjust to your life in general at university. You probably have some expectations of how different your life will be, and certain changes and adjustments are to be expected.

Academic adjustment: The educational and academic demands at university are very different to high school. You are likely to experience new academic concerns, such as how to interact with lecturers and diverse students. You may feel overwhelmed by what is academically expected of you. And you may even experience a degree of demotivation or develop a fear of failure. All this is natural! But decide to be proactive about the adjustment:

- Attend your lectures.
- Form study groups.
- Set weekly goals.
- Work on improving your time management; familiarise yourself with your timetable.
- Be informed; make well-informed choices.
- Be confident: Believe in yourself, be your own biggest fan.
- Stay motivated: Identify your personal reasons for being in university, and keep reminders of this in your everyday space.
- Recognise your past achievements and remember all that you did to get here.
- Recognise your day-to-day accomplishments to remind yourself that you *are* capable of doing well at university.
- Look for help when you need it: take advantage of advice from department heads and lecturers, use student services, talk to your peers!

Social adjustment: Interpersonal challenges and possibly some social discomfort at university are to be expected. Feeling lonely, homesick or isolated are not uncommon, especially during the

first few weeks. For international students this can be compounded by communication difficulties, culture shock, and the change in food and housing. Face the challenge by –

- Using support from back home: Stay in touch with your friends and family.
- Creating peer networks: Share your current experiences with other new students.
- Monitoring your attitude: Be open to new friendships and interacting with people from other backgrounds.
- Getting in touch with students from your high school or home area.
- Giving yourself downtime between lectures and assignments.
- Getting involved on campus: Join at least one society, club or sports group that interests you.

Psychological and emotional adjustment: The psychological distress and inner discomfort students may experience when they first enter university is quite real and can impact your personal functioning and stress levels. Be mindful of your psychological and emotional wellness:

- Find healthy ways of expressing your feelings: continue to social network with friends and family and students, visit new places, go dancing, keep a journal, meditate, go to gym.
- Take care of your health! Exercise, eat proper meals, get enough sleep, and get out and explore your new space.
- Retain your cultural habits or religious beliefs.
- Maintain relationships with family and friends – especially by taking the opportunity to speak with or text them regularly.
- Don't be shy to ask for help at the campus Counselling Centre.
- Sustain your own optimism – and meanwhile spread it around.

Institutional commitment and attachment: Your short- and long-term adjustment will be affected by the level of attachment you associate with attending university, how satisfied you are with the university, how committed you are to achieving your academic goals, and if you feel like a part of the particular institution. To assist with that:

- Attend Orientation Week.
- Discover the things about *your* university that *you* like.
- Always get involved with student activities and events.
- Keep up with current issues at the university.
- Show institutional spirit! Own something with the university name, like a t-shirt, stationary or jersey.

Coping strategies: Research has identified various coping strategies operating among university students: namely, preventative, reflective, strategic planning, instrumental support-seeking, emotional support-seeking and proactive coping. Southern African university students seem to most often use proactive coping, which appears to be beneficial in overcoming stressful events during higher-education studies. To get positive outcomes as a proactive copier, one makes use of both *internal resources* – in the form of optimism and self-efficacy – as well as

external resources – in the form of emotional social support, for example. In short, this strategy can help with increasing one's life satisfaction while simultaneously decreasing negative outcomes like depression, burnout and anger. As you enter this university-phase life journey, from whatever point you may be at, as an undergraduate or postgraduate, you may well be proactive in finding your own personal ways of adjusting. After all, university is challenging, yet ultimately an exciting and rewarding environment.

Sources

Mudhovozi, P. (2011) Adjustment experiences of international students at a South African university. *Journal of Psychology in Africa* 21(2): 293–296.

Renard, M. & Snelgar, R.J. (2015) Using the Proactive Coping Inventory to measure southern African university students' coping styles. *South African Journal of Psychology* 45(2): 168–181.

Sommer, M.M. (2013) *Psychosocial factors predicting the adjustment and academic performance of university students* (Doctoral dissertation). University of South Africa, Pretoria.