

# Navigating The College Social Scene

**F**OR MANY STUDENTS college life is, in large part, about the social scene—making new friends, adjusting to new roommates and fitting in with the right crowd. College also offers more freedom. You can come and go as you please, and your parents won't be there to remind you to study, brush your teeth or eat your vegetables. You won't have a curfew and you don't have to go to class. (Although, if you don't, you'll be saying goodbye to "college life" before you even get to your second semester!)

It sounds exciting, but for most freshmen it can also be a little overwhelming. There are new responsibilities such as doing laundry, paying your own bills, balancing your checkbook, finding your own meals and determining your own schedule. And, although some won't admit it, most freshmen are a little worried about fitting in, being cool and making friends.

For students with AD/HD, the desire to be part of the group and connect with others, while keeping up with their schoolwork, can be even more challenging. If you have AD/HD, then this is not news to you. You've had to work a little harder at many tasks in life, and it's all paid off. So, take a deep breath and get ready for the next challenge *and* the time of your life!

If you are like many college-age students with AD/HD, self-management is not necessarily your "thing." It involves planning, organization and resisting some distractions so that you can focus on what is most important at the time. Here are three areas to consider when adjusting to your college social life.

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by Stephen Rothenberg, Psy.D.

## I. Living with Roommates

Many freshmen come to school having never shared a room with a sibling, let alone a complete stranger. You may turn out to be best friends or you may not. Either way, respect and consideration will be important factors. You will both need to make some compromises, and that involves open communication.

So, how does someone with AD/HD discuss and solve cohabitation problems with a roommate? Active listening is a good start. It involves hearing what the other person has said and then repeating it back to make sure you understood correctly. For example:

**Roommate:** "It bothers me when you start calling people late at night."

**You:** "Sorry, I didn't know that it bothers you when I call people late at night." Then you can add, "I'll try to make my calls earlier or I'll leave the room."

When you have gotten to know each other better and you feel comfortable, you may want to mention



that you have AD/HD. Explain the disorder to your roommate. You may even consider providing your roommate with some background information on AD/HD. This explanation will help him or her to better understand you and your actions at times.

Remember that what is significant to your roommate is important. You will have to balance your needs and those of your roommate. You won't know what each of you needs unless you *communicate*. Try to express your needs directly, but politely. How can you do this? Sometimes it may be easier for you to write things down in a notebook (to help you remember) and to leave notes for each other. Having your roommate leave you notes will help you remember what he or she needs.

## 2. Meeting New People

There are many opportunities to meet new people in college. One of the first places is in your dormitory. Since many colleges have co-ed dorms, you may find

yourself sharing a suite or hall with members of the opposite sex. This is a learning experience in and of itself! How do you become a part of the group?

- **Ask questions**—While it sounds simple, one of the best ways to make friends is to take an interest in other people. Ask them questions about themselves. Make a real effort to listen to them when they talk. Do not over focus on what *you* want to say.

- **Learn to read body language**—People with AD/HD are often impulsive and spontaneous, which makes them the life of the party. While that is great, nobody wants to be at a party all of the time. Everyone needs down time and study time, including you, so try to watch for signals that others may need a break. Are they looking at their watches? Do they start to look away more frequently? Do they turn their bodies away from you? These may be signs that it's time to move on.

Besides the dormitory, there are other great places

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to meet people and make friends, but this requires some work on your part. You will need to find ways to place yourself in situations where you have the best chance of meeting other students.

■ **Join a club or religious group**—There are many organizations on campus. Joining a religious group or club can put you in touch with others who share like interests and will help you to feel a sense of community at school. Most groups also plan social activities, so you'll have a chance to talk in a more relaxed atmosphere.

■ **Go to the library**—Yes, that's right, the library. Besides getting your work done, it can be a good place for meeting others. Of course you will have to manage how much you socialize so that you can get the work part done, too.

■ **Try out for a team or consider playing intramural sports**—Most colleges offer opportunities to get involved with sports at



many different levels. You'll be able to get exercise and learn to build camaraderie with other team members.

### 3. Surviving the Social Scene

With its unstructured setting, college offers a tempting playground for the party lifestyle. Drugs and alcohol are available in

abundance and a lot of people use them. But you don't have to.

Untreated AD/HD can put an individual at greater risk for substance abuse with alcohol and illicit drugs. However, studies have shown that students being treated for AD/HD are at a lower risk for substance abuse (Biederman, *et al.*) If you are not

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actively addressing your AD/HD, then the impulsivity and difficulty managing feelings could increase the risk of using drugs as a way to “feel better” or to provide higher levels of stimulation.

As someone with AD/HD, you work really hard to make friends and to do things to increase your own self respect. Getting drunk or high may make you less inhibited, but you can embarrass yourself or get into some dangerous situations (e.g., drinking and driving, sexual assault).

Use your power to assert yourself in situations that make you feel uncomfortable or that you know are not good for you. Just say, “No, thanks.” You may be tempted to try different drugs or to have sex with someone because you are either “turned on” or want to please the

other person. You need to stop and think, “Will this be good for my brain? Will this help me to feel good about myself?” If you have the courage to do what is right for you, your true friends will respect you. Anyone who doesn’t accept your decision is not a good friend.

Managing your AD/HD and your college social life can be a challenge, but the rewards are endless. So get going and say “hello” to an exciting chapter of your life. ■

Stephen Rothenberg, Psy.D., is a Boston-area psychologist and has been in practice for over 20 years.

### References

Biederman, J., Wilens, T., Mick, E., Spencer T., & Faraone, S. (1999). Pharmacotherapy of attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder reduces risk for substance use disorder. *Pediatrics*, 104(2), e20.