

**Family Difficulties** are often a primary source of students' distress, giving rise to a variety of issues that they may have to deal with. The difficulties may involve contemporary conflicts, disruptions and / or crisis both within the family and between the student and salient family members. It is also very common that family problems lie beneath the surface of students' complaints, both academic and social.

Two factors in particular seem to contribute to this situation:

The changes in the structure of the family stemming from women's changing position in the society, the changing sexual division of labour and the increasing rates of separation / divorce. The developmental status of students who are in the process of separating and establishing themselves as autonomous individuals.

What are the different types of family difficulties?

Autonomy struggles in conflicted families

Students' internal conflicts about becoming independent may have special intensity and meaning when their families are divided and hence insecure. Students then may fear to become autonomous and disrupt the family further. Autonomy struggles usually manifest themselves in crises centered around academic performance - the most obvious avenue to independence at this life stage. For example, a student's ambivalence about detaching him / herself from home may be expressed as a fear of success. They may be fully able to succeed, want to do so, and at the same time feel that they are "needed" at home. Their role as focus of parental conflict may block them in attempts to achieve. Students who have been forced to comply with the wishes of a controlling parent may express their autonomy struggles in crises of will, such as loss of motivation, absenteeism and so on.

Difficulties stemming from loss

Parental death, separation / divorce, and disabling illness constitute significant losses for students. Usually these losses have taken place prior to the college years and may be implicated in concerns about current relationships, depressive feelings and identity conflicts, fears and sense of aloneness during periods of separation. Frequently students adopt a stance of pseudoindependence and they need to find ways by which to obtain and accept emotional supplies.

An earlier loss may be reactivated by the developmental stage and by a current family situation. Consequently, the student may need to express their grief for the lost parent, and face the feelings associated with the deceased in order to free up the capacity for future attachments.

## Difficulties in separating from the family

Although many students may have to deal with ordinary separation problems when going to college, there are certain family circumstances, which make separation especially complicated. One kind of complication may appear in same-sex parent-child relationships, in which a parent over-identifies with and attempts to live through the child. For example, a student may try to be the idealised woman her mother would have liked to have been herself.

Another complication is present in relationships where the child has assumed the role of the parent's caretaker. The student may regard his parent as quite psychologically vulnerable and fear that the latter would be threatened if he were to become more dependent.

In such cases, students may sabotage themselves, e.g. failing to complete projects, dropping courses, becoming pregnant, or develop symptoms, such as anxiety or phobias, when they need to make important decisions, e.g. graduating, career commitments etc.

Students from families in which there has been little available parenting (disengaged families) suffer from lack of psychological inputs. This in turn may limit their capacity to make use of resources within the college. Disengagement may consist of emotional distance from at least one parent, or in separated families, of a frequently absent father and an emotionally withdrawn or self-absorbed mother. (See also [Adult Children of Alcoholics](#)).

Depending upon which parent is more disengaged and the degree and chronic nature of emotional distance, students may exhibit varying difficulties and problems. They may experience diffuse feelings of dissatisfaction, complain of lack of interests, express indifference in achieving, extreme sensitivity to rejection, and have low self-esteem.

Quite often, disengagement in young college women involves the father-daughter relationship. The distance may be a result of marital instability, or a father's extreme discomfort with their adolescent daughter's sexuality. Female students whose father is emotionally unavailable and unsupportive of their feminine self may be inclined to enter relationships with immature partners.

When a student is unable to inform the parents about his or her problems or feels that the parents will deny his / her difficulties, it is important to utilise resources within the college. Talking to a tutor or seeking support from a counsellor can be avenues to the formation of understanding and reparative relationships.

Further reading:

Dryden, W. & Gordon, J. (1995). How to cope with difficult parents. London: Sheldon Press.

Forward, S. (1989). Toxic parents: Overcoming their hurtful legacy and reclaiming your life. New York: Bantam Books.

Skynner, R.R. & Cleese, J. (1983). Families and how to survive them. London: Methuen.

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