

Family Difficulties

Family difficulties are often a primary source of students' distress. They can give rise to a variety of issues that students may have to deal with. 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' difficulties - both academic and social.

Two factors in particular seem to contribute to this situation:

1. The changes in the structure of the family stemming from the changes in women's position in society, the changing sexual division of labour and the increasing rates of separation and divorce.
2. 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?

There are four general types of family difficulties experienced in this context. These are:

1. **Difficulties stemming from loss.** Parental death, separation or divorce of parents and disabling illness constitute significant losses for students. Even when these losses have taken place prior to the college years, they may be implicated in current concerns such as relationships, depressive feelings and identity conflicts, fears and a sense of aloneness during periods of separation. Frequently students adopt a stance of pseudo-independence and they need to find ways to obtain and accept emotional supplies.

An earlier loss may be reactivated by the development stage of the student 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 grief for the lost parent in order to free up the emotional capacity for future attachments.

2. **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. A student may try to be the idealised woman her mother would like to have been for example.

Another complication is present in relationships where the child has assumed the role of the parent's caretaker. The student may regard the parent as being psychologically vulnerable and fear that the latter would be threatened if the student were to become independent. In such situations, students may sabotage themselves, for example by failing to complete projects, dropping courses or becoming pregnant. They may develop symptoms such as anxiety or phobias when they need to make important decisions regarding graduating or career.

3. **Autonomy struggles in turbulent families.** Students' internal conflicts about becoming independent may have special intensity and meaning if their families are divided and insecure. Students may fear that becoming autonomous may disrupt the family further. Autonomy struggles usually manifest themselves in crises centred around academic performance, the most obvious avenue to independence at this life stage. A student may express his or her ambivalence about detaching him or herself from home as a fear of success for example. S/he may be fully able to succeed, and want to do so, while at the same time feeling they are 'needed' at home.

A student's role as a 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.

4. **Attachment difficulties associated with disengaged families.** Students from families in which there has been little available parenting (i.e. disengaged families) suffer from a lack of psychological and emotional input. This in turn may limit the student's capacity to make use of resources within the college. Disengagement may consist of emotional distance from at least one parent or in separated families a frequently absent and an emotionally withdrawn or self-absorbed parent.

Depending on which parent is more disengaged and the degree and chronic nature of emotional distance involved, 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.

Some More Help?

The following reading might be useful:

Dryden, W. and 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

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

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